Rolling Stone

UK

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2024
ISSUE 015

KINGSLEY BEN-ADIR

Bringing the legacy of Bob Marley to film in One Love

DUA LIPA

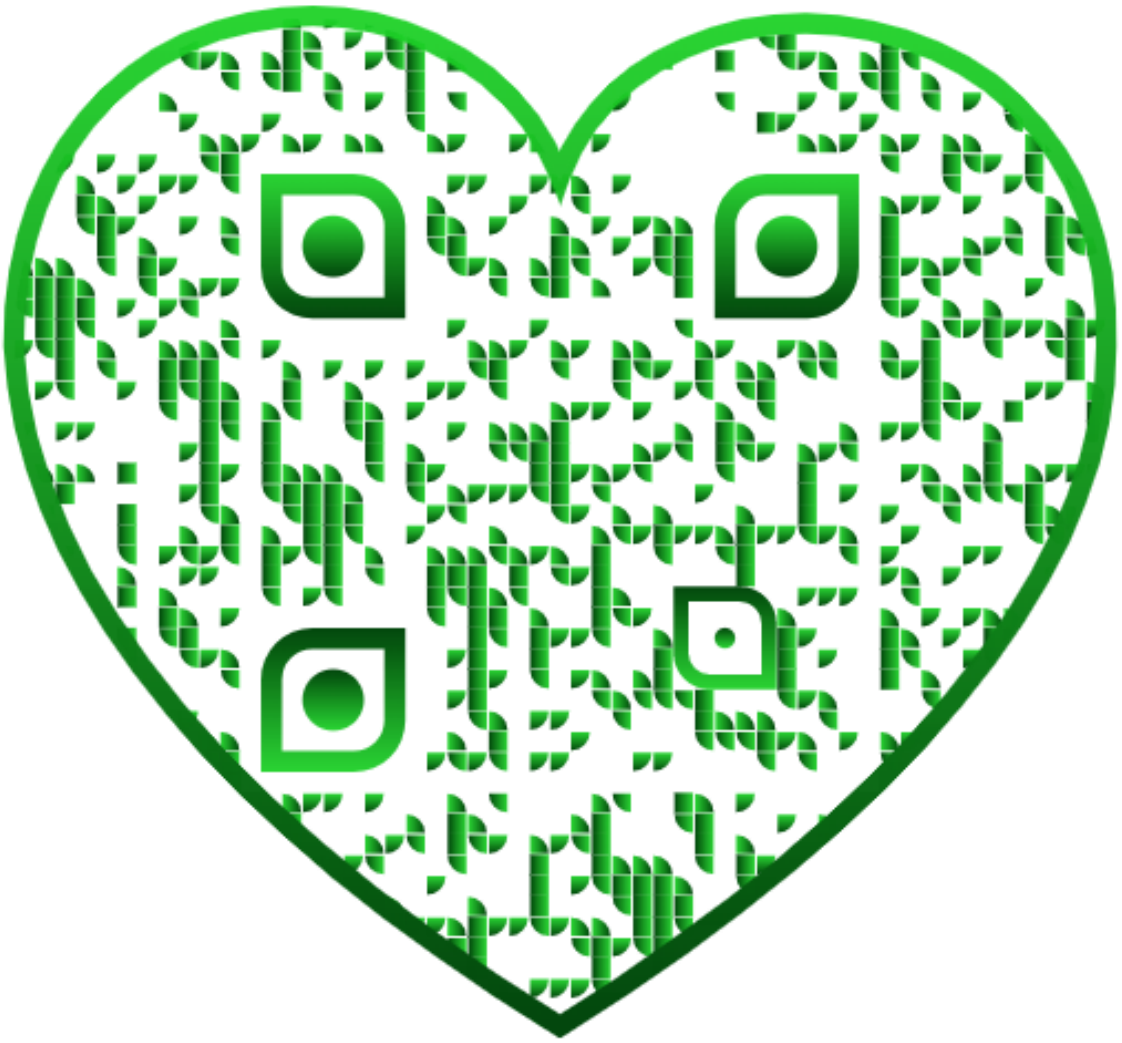
IS GIVING US EVERYTHING

IDLES

How love and healing influenced fifth album Tangk

+

SEKOU
YARD ACT
PALOMA FAITH
DECLAN MCKENNA
VICTORIA MONET
KELLY ROWLAND
SLEATER-KINNEY
OMAR APOLLO
SNOOP DOGG
DJ KHALED
21 SAVAGE
LATTO



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Contents

50

Dua Lipa

As she enters her Saturn return, the pop superstar is ready to have some fun

62

IDLES

How love and healing inspired the band's incredible new record

72

Bob Marley on the big screen

Hand-picked by the Marleys, actor Kingsley Ben-Adir is bringing the reggae legend's life to cinema

88

Declan McKenna

New record, new sound. The singer-songwriter on his third album, *What Happened to the Beach?*

RS

ISSUE 015

"It's Bob through me. This is my interpretation of who he was"

Kingsley Ben-Adir

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Danny Kasirye**

Contents

62

Features

82 **Yard Act**
Navigating the path between fantasy and success and why their second album tells a more personal story

94 **21 Savage**
Your favourite rapper's favourite rapper

106 **DJ Khaled**
The DJ and producer who can't stop dominating the airwaves

116 **Musicians on Musicians**
The world's greatest in conversation with the hottest new names in music

116 Snoop Dogg & Latto
124 Grimes & Aespa
128 Omar Apollo & Lindsey Buckingham
132 Kelly Rowland & Victoria Monét
136 Rema & Swizz Beats
140 Big Boi & J.I.D
144 Becky G & Thalía

The Mix

25 **Sekou**
This musical teen prodigy is bringing big vocals back

28 **Brent Faiyaz**
The R&B artist on bad habits, zodiac signs, mob movies and singing live on tour

30 **Paloma Faith**
Turning heartbreak into song for her new album *The Glorification of Sadness*

32 **Recommends**
Listen out for the music stars of tomorrow: from Flowerovlove to Seb Lowe, these are the new acts set to break out this year

36 **Sleater-Kinney**
Navigating grief: how the punk duo channelled tragedy through music

38 **Uncle Waffles**
Behind the scenes with the amapiano star, the hottest new DJ to come out of the US

42 **The Rolling Stone UK Awards**
in collaboration with Rémy Martin, where we crowned trailblazers in the fields of music, television and film

Reviews

149 **Music**
Our verdict is in on albums by: The Last Dinner Party, Liam Gallagher & John Squire, Master Peace, IDLES, and The Smile; plus we take a look back at Beyoncé's phenomenal discography

154 **Film**
We rate: *All of Us Strangers*, *The Zone of Interest*, *American Fiction* and *Jackdaw*

156 **Style**
Lifestyle must-haves, from a spring/summer fashion preview to the latest Beats headphones

160 **Road test**
Luxe travel in Bentley Bentayga EWB

Departments

14 Contributors
16 Opening Act
162 Last Word: Rod Stewart unites with Jools Holland

LILLIE EIGER

VOLVO

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Editor's Letter

TV can be a force for change

FROM *TRAITORS* TO World Cup finals via the *EastEnders* Christmas special or the next incarnation of *Doctor Who*, beyond its ability to entertain and bring the people together in anticipation of that 'what happens next' moment, television has also been at the forefront of social, political and legal change in the UK.

Most often the domain of the documentary exposé (*Panorama*, et al) it's when drama breaks out and captures the real-world zeitgeist that its power is most extraordinary. BBC drama *Cathy Come Home* highlighted the issue of homelessness way back in 1966, prompting questions in parliament and the eventual launch of charity Shelter a year later. Following the broadcast of Russell T Davies' Channel 4 series *It's a Sin* in 2021, orders of HIV tests more than tripled compared to charity Terrence Higgins Trust's previous busiest day for ordering. By the end of National HIV Testing Week that year, over 17,000 orders of HIV tests had been placed – more than twice that ordered a year earlier.

This month, ITV drama *Mr Bates vs the Post Office* has forced the most immediate response from a government to a TV programme ever, prompting it to announce legislation to clear the names of more than 900 UK sub-postmasters that had wrongly been accused of fraud and theft between 1999 and 2015, due to the faulty Horizon accounting software. It's been widely praised as the most socially effective programme in the 88-year history of British television.

Beyond the awful facts of the Royal Mail Horizon scandal and how it destroyed the lives of innocent people – and in some cases ended them – the situation has highlighted just how broken our parliamentary system has become. The debacle has been a failure of successive governments, from its introduction under John Major, through to Blair's government continuing with the scheme despite warnings that it could be flawed, and on through 13 years of Conservative government. Since 1999, there has been a revolving door of Post Office ministers: seven Labour, eight Tories and four Liberal Democrats.

"Justice for the victims had been side-lined until the ITV drama"

Since the issue came to light in 2015, justice for the victims of the scandal had been repeatedly side-lined until the ITV drama captured the ire of the UK and forced the government's hand. The fact that this has happened in the year of a general election and amid the ongoing collapse of the current government is fortuitous for those victims that might at last see their names cleared and compensation forthcoming. It's also an example of the incredulous outlook that the government has towards justice, fairness and doing the right thing, having now been embarrassed into action.

It's a sad state of politics in Britain where real change is being driven by a public outcry to a television drama and not by the persistence of elected officials, whose job it is to protect the interests of the people, to do the right thing. Westminster should be ashamed of itself. This is a wake-up call for all in government, and those seeking to win the next election.

CLIFF JOANNOU
EDITOR IN CHIEF

ON THE COVER

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DUA WEARS DRESS BY HODAKOVA, EARRINGS BY LUCAS BAUER, TIGHTS BY WOLFORD

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Contributors

Aaron Parsons
Photographer

Music photography is the thing for me. I love the unpredictable nature of it, getting close to artists who inspire and of course the diversity in looks, cultures and genres that music entails. It all comes together in a crescendo of creativity that I adore being a part of.

It was awesome to work with such a lovely and intriguing band as Yard Act. The lads were good fun and game for all the different ideas I had during the shoot, which makes such a difference. I had an open-minded approach to the shoot and initially wanted to get a sense of the band — this tends to lead my direction. I was spoilt for choice with the location: The Maven is full of character and charm, and I wanted to make the most of the environment with a mix of natural and posed shots. The band were really photogenic, and I was delighted with the results.

Lillie Eiger
Photographer

Working with IDLES has been on my list for a very long time, so when I was asked to shoot them for Rolling Stone UK, I was beyond stoked. I wanted to create a sense of playfulness in the images while stripping back the shots — letting each of the band member's individuality stand out. They have always struck me as dynamic and fun characters online and especially onstage, so I was really looking forward to collaborating with them. I handed a shutter-release cable to frontman Joe, giving the power of pulling the trigger to him. And of course, that's what we ended up using for the cover! Working and being around colourful and unique characters is what inspires me, so it's only fitting that working closely with musicians has become a big part of my practice. Thank you to Rolling Stone UK for the opportunity to work with such an iconic band!

Sope Soetan
Writer

I'm a writer, speaker, researcher and music publicist from London. The lion's share of my creative practice is concerned with highlighting relationships between Black music of the past and how it reverberates in the present day. I've previously interviewed the likes of Mathew Knowles, Jim Legxacy, Jazmine Sullivan, serpentwithfeet, Joyce Wrice and Che Lingo. It was an absolute pleasure interviewing Sekou. He is witty and full of personality, with a palpable desire to be more than just a flash in the pan. I'm keen to see how he continues to come into his own.

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SOETAN: SEYE ISIKALU

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Frame of mind

Spanning seven decades of Yoko Ono's multidisciplinary practice, Tate Modern exhibition Music of the Mind invites viewers to experience the themes that have firmly cemented Ono's status as a trailblazer in art, music and activism. Featuring more than 200 works, including installations, films, music, photography and much more, this is the first major retrospective of Yoko Ono and presents her radical ideas and approaches and their ongoing relevance to the here and now. For those wanting to get hands-on, there are opportunities to paint, colour, wish and play, as you reflect on the urgent global issues Ono has made her life's concern.

YOKO ONO: MUSIC OF THE MIND OPENS AT TATE MODERN ON 15 FEBRUARY

YOKO ONO, CUT PIECE 1964. PERFORMED BY YOKO ONO IN 'NEW WORKS BY YOKO ONO', CARNEGIE RECITAL HALL, NYC, MARCH 21 1965. PHOTO © MINORU NIIZUMA

100 years of Loewe

Marking a century of audio excellence and elegant design, German audio-visual pioneer Loewe has launched the radio.frequency DAB+ portable radio as a tribute to the company's original Radio Frequenz Gmbh name and the Loewe brothers' first radio, the legendary Loewe local receiver 0E 333 with triple tube. It marries superb design with high-quality materials that range from fine oak wood inlays to the basalt-coloured acoustic fabric specially developed in-house to elevate the luxurious aesthetic. The Loewe radio.frequency exemplifies the brand's 100-year expertise through two full-range speakers, a rechargeable battery that provides up to 14 hours' portable playtime and a passive bass radiator delivering first-class sound that is clear, precise and well rounded. A classic reinvented.

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Opening Act

Bearing all

Man of the moment actor Jeremy Allen White has been steaming up more than just the kitchen lately — his role in Calvin Klein's spring 2024 campaign has set the internet on fire. The star of *The Bear* models the label's refreshed underwear collection. On show are the new Intense Power, Micro Stretch and Micro Mesh pieces as well as the Modern Cotton and Cotton stretch cuts, all in the minimal style that defines the brand. Jeremy also donned 90s blue denim, leaving us in no doubt that it's time to usher in Short King Spring.

CALVINKLEIN.CO.UK

IMAGE COURTESY OF CALVIN KLEIN. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MERT ALAS

Talking Italian

Giorgio Armani and photographer Aldo Fallai's creative connection has spanned almost 30 years. To celebrate, the Italian brand has put on the Aldo Fallai Per Giorgio Armani, 1977–2021 exhibition at Armani/Silos. Curated by Giorgio Armani, Rosanna Armani and Leo Dell'Orco, it showcases plenty of iconic images of male models: some wear Italian-crafted, *American Psycho*-style boxy suits; others are clad in just denim jeans while holding everything from baby tigers to floral bouquets. With its vintage fashion feel, the exhibition marks a golden age in fashion iconography.

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ALDO FALLAI

Opening Act

Manchester University Press

Treasure island

The Island Book of Records Volume I: 1959-68 showcases Island Records' archival treasures for the first time, offering a trip back to an era when music ignited a cultural renaissance. Edited by Neil Storey, former head of press at Island Records, and published by Manchester University Press, this first volume documenting the label's 65-year history features every album released from 1959 when the label was founded by Chris Blackwell in Jamaica through to 1968 in the UK. Spotlighting Island Records' pioneering LP adverts — many of which became art in their own right — the collection includes booklets, die-cut covers, gig adverts, record-release flyers, magazine covers, concert tickets, foreign editions and even unreleased LPs. The vinyl-sized book runs to 392 pages, with contemporary commentary and historical interviews bringing the content vividly to life.

Tiger team

To celebrate its 75th anniversary, Japanese brand Onitsuka Tiger has drawn up a cool collab with vintage anime classic *Astro Boy*, Japan's first full-length anime TV series. Available in its pop-up store in Ginza, Tokyo, as well as online and in select international stores, the collection features the original logo and *Astro Boy* designs on no less than 43 items, including shirts, tracksuits and trousers. There are also plenty of kawaii accessories, from body bags and hats to footwear, including the Mexico 66™ SD and the Dentigre™ puff boot. And if you have a soft spot for packaging, the capsule's *Astro Boy*-themed shopping bags and boxes will be a real, collectable treat.

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KIRK HAMMETT

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Ahead of his time

He may have been dubbed the "saviour of pop", but teenage star and BRIT nominee Sekou is taking a level-headed approach to his newfound fame

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Alistair McVeigh**

IN THE MERE eight months since 19-year-old Sekou (pronounced see-coo) stepped onto the scene, he's been greeted with perhaps the warmest industry welcome in recent memory.

With a Rising Star nomination at this year's BRITs, a sold-out headline show at London's Outernet and a celebrity fanbase that includes Quincy Jones, Timbaland, Bruno Mars, Anderson Paak, Brooklyn Beckham and Dua Lipa, you could be forgiven for assuming the red carpet has been rolled out prematurely.

Prior to its official release, his first single 'Better Man' had the grandest of unveilings when he graced none other than the Glastonbury stage with his towering vocal capabilities.

What might first appear to be a miraculous rise to prominence is in reality a story of transcending record-label purgatory with mind-blowing results. Beneath the Leicester-born teen's boyish countenance and meek demeanour is a self-assured individual who radiates poise and unassuming determination.

Sekou's inaugural project *Out of Mind* was released last June. It's a pop-leaning EP with well-placed and understated allusions to adult contemporary-style balladry, gospel, 80s funk and contemporary soul.

Following his recently released single 'Time Will Tell' and ahead of an upcoming tour across Europe with Reneé Rapp, we caught up with Sekou to discuss his journey so far.

You were signed at 16 but didn't publicly debut until you were 18. What happened during the two-year interim?

Initially, I wasn't doing anything. The label left me to my own devices for the first year. I've now learned getting discovered and actually putting out music are two completely different things. I was already posting covers on social media, but I went HAM with it after getting signed. I wasn't trying to go viral; I just wanted to have my voice seen and heard. Eventually, people in the industry began reaching out about wanting to work with me, and it developed from there.

What was the genesis behind your breakout track, 'Better Man'?

'Better Man' was one of the first songs that I ever wrote. I wanted to write a story in song form about my upbringing. Growing up was very messy, and I was always moving house. Seeing my mum work so hard as a single mother in spite of everything was inspirational. I remember coming up with the title and the chorus, but it wasn't quite there yet. I then remember talking to myself in the studio, and something flipped. The lyrics just came out all at once – each one true and honest.

'Better Man' has subtle gospel embellishments. What role did the church play in your musical development?

I'm obsessed with Whitney Houston, and I remember watching footage of her in church. The feeling I got watching her sing gospel was the same as when I'd watch people in my church. I was really inspired by them, especially Larry Jackson who was the priest and musical director there. Church is where I discovered that music was what I wanted to do. It's definitely a sound that I want to continue exploring in my music.

'Forgiving Myself' is the EP's sole up-tempo track. You co-wrote it with DIXSON, who helmed Beyoncé's Oscar-nominated 'Be Alive' as well as select tracks on *Renaissance*. What was it like working with him?

DIXSON was incredible; he also co-wrote one of the other tracks on the EP: 'You and I'. This song was born during my second LA trip after working solely on ballads on the first trip. I wanted to explore an up-tempo sound because I love to dance and I love to move. I remember citing Michael Jackson's 'Leave Me Alone' as

TEENAGE DREAMS Sekou wants to bring the focus back to strong vocals

“Albums come and go so quickly. Artists drop one, and minutes later everyone has moved on. I want to do one when I know everyone’s going to hear it”

a reference for what I had in mind. ‘Forgiving Myself’ was my first time recording something with edge and attitude.

You have a rich and bottom-heavy baritone voice with range and authority. Who inspires you vocally? Tell me about your desire to bring real singing back to commercial music.

Amy Winehouse is a big inspiration vocally. With voices like hers or Mariah, Celine or Ariana, you can deeply feel what they’re singing. It’s in the details of their riffs and runs. I want to be known as someone with a big voice and [to] show that vocals still matter. There are definitely some incredible singers in this generation, but there are so many who don’t “sing sing” anymore. With how impactful social media has become, a lot of big artists now rely on different things.

You’ve been touted as a “musical prodigy” and “contemporary pop’s saviour”. How are you dealing with the pressure and lofty expectations?

I do love a good challenge, but it’s not even like that for me. This is what I’m doing everything for. My dream is to have worldwide number one singles and [to] make music that can change people’s lives. I’ll do everything to make that a reality. The pressure just makes me want to work 20 times harder.

Before I released ‘Better Man’, there were so many people trying to control me. Of course, there are many educated and experienced people in this industry, but I think nowadays, you actually never know what’s going to work. I don’t think anybody – whether that’s the artist or even really high-powered record executives – knows anymore. We’re all just hoping for the best, basically.

I’ve learned that with the artists who are succeeding at the minute, they’re running their own ship. They may have a big team, but it’s their vision and their ideas. That’s what I’m trying to do also.

Being so young, did you have any reservations about entering the industry, especially with the history of teen stars sometimes being mishandled and taken advantage of?

You see and hear so many things and, honestly, it’s really scary. That’s for all artists, but especially terrifying for those under 20. It’s why I’ve only had a manager for a month and a half. You can’t just jump in with someone. I had to get to know a few people.

I didn’t come from a musical family, and I didn’t know anyone in the industry, but watching documentaries and seeing the likes of Beyoncé, Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran be very demanding of what they want for themselves and see how their brains work was inspiring. As a new artist, I can’t be as demanding as them, but it’s about baby steps.

Can we expect an album in 2024?

I’m definitely writing towards an album, but it won’t come out for another two years. Albums come and go so quickly nowadays. Artists will drop one, and minutes later everyone has already moved on. Doing an album is bigger than that for me. I want to do one when I know everyone’s going to hear it. I definitely want to do another EP. I have a few features in the pipeline, and I worked on a Queen-inspired song with Labrinth. It’s weirdly sexy, campy and theatrical. I’ll be going on tour with Reneé Rapp in February. I just want to continue building my audience. **SOPE SOETAN**

Q&A

Brent Faiyaz

The R&B superstar on bad habits, zodiac signs, mob movies, and raising the bar for live vocals on tour

By LARISHA PAUL

LISTEN TO BRENT Faiyaz's music long enough and his life starts to sound like a movie. He's the director, screenwriter and main character in an imaginary film born from late nights in big cities, hushed conversations with women at loud parties, and emotions felt without penitence. Faiyaz doesn't see himself as a villain, even when he sings about sending those "You up?" texts that he probably shouldn't, or upending a good thing to see if the grass is greener on the other side. But he isn't all that sorry if you see him that way. His catalogue to date has earned a stunning 7.2 billion global on-demand streams, according to Luminate data. For his third studio album, *Larger than Life*, he stayed true to his vision. "This is how I see the world. This is my universe. This is what we do. This is what it feels like," the Maryland native, 28, says over Zoom. "What I look like letting motherfuckers tell me what my world looks like?"

You've been called a "toxic king" of R&B. Do you feel like that term is overused these days?
I think it's all about what you're used to. To some people, I might say some brutal, outrageous shit. But to motherfuckers who hear outrageous shit, I'm not really saying nothing that crazy. I grew up on Max B and Dipset. People who haven't been exposed to certain environments will see shit for the first time and it's outrageous to them.

What's your biggest vice, and how do you break cycles of bad habits like the ones you explore on your recent single 'WY@'?
I'm a procrastinator, I'm a frivolous spender, and I definitely spend a lot of time with a lot of different women. That record reflects having access and opportunity, and having to say no to certain shit – or the inability to say no to certain shit. That record is about addiction in a way, shape, or form, but more from the perspective of submitting to it versus fighting against it. It touches on addiction in a way that makes it a little more seductive.

Do you know your birth chart?
I'm a Virgo sun, Cancer moon or some shit like that.

Do women ask you that question a lot?
Yeah, that's like the number-one conversation. "What's your birthday? Do you know what time you were born?" Motherfuckers love talking about some zodiac shit. I think it's good conversation. It's fun if you at a spot and you meet somebody – you want to chat to 'em, just ask them about some zodiac shit.

Does astrology hold any weight to you?
Sometimes I'm curious to know whether we truly are defined by our zodiac signs, or whether we all exhibit traits that everybody exhibits, and we learn our zodiac sign and we conform to whatever our sign is. There's been times where a chick asks me, "What's your sign?" And I'd lie and say I'm a fucking Gemini. And they'd be like, "I fucking knew it. You give Gemini vibes."

When you're touring, people always post online about being surprised that you actually sing at shows.
Shit was funny as hell. I was surprised that they were surprised. I'm like, "I came here to do a show. What the fuck y'all thought I was finna do?"

The bar for performance is so low!
You can't cheat these people, man. On some level, when it comes to your creativity, you tell that story in whatever way you see fit. But when it comes to presentation, you for damn sure better give these people something to talk about.

Your tour wraps soon in Paris. Have you seen the headlines about the bedbug outbreak over there?
This the first I'm hearing about it. I'm just getting over the flu, and you're talking about some damn bedbugs? I've never even seen a bedbug. I'm not trying to see my first one on tour. If they finna be following me around, they need to buy some tickets or carry some merch. Make their little asses useful.

Do you see parallels between the ways people tell stories in music and film?
I get inspired so much by movies. I'll watch a movie, or I'll peep a scenario in a TV show, and I'll just start scoring it. I'll be in a studio and I'll just place it on mute, or I'll watch cartoons on mute just because a certain scene that evokes a certain emotion will make a certain chord or a certain melody come out.

Who are your favourite film directors?
I'm a big fan of mob films. I like a lot of violence and shit like that, so I fuck with Scorsese. I like a lot of blood and colours and excitement, so I look at Tarantino films. I like stories and I like seeing Black people portrayed in a way onscreen that's beautiful, so I also watch a lot of Spike Lee and John Singleton. And if I want to look at some shit that's just visually appealing, I put on Wes Anderson.

Directors, and even screenwriters, kind of have it nice, because they can create these stories and present them without being positioned as the face of them. Musicians don't have that same luxury.
I never focus too hard on the reception as much as I do just getting it out, telling the story that I want to tell. I think that's the purest way to create, when I don't really think about nothing other than "This looks good to me. This feels good to me. This sounds good to me." I just let it fly. ®

MARK "PEACED" PANGILINAN

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MUSIC

Faith, hope and reinvention

An unflinchingly honest portrait of heartbreak, grief and learning to put yourself first, Paloma Faith's sixth album,* The Glorification of Sadness, *is her most personal yet

By WILL RICHARDS

A WORD THAT CONSTANTLY crops up in discussions around Paloma Faith's upcoming sixth album, *The Glorification of Sadness*, is reinvention. Recorded in the aftermath of her split from her husband and the father of her two children, the new album is both a musical evolution for the singer and a document of a time that blew her life wide open. "If reinvention means that there's no energy left to pretend and that it's just the purest truth, then yes, it's a reinvention," the singer agrees matter-of-factly when presented with the idea.

"You do naturally have a bit of a reinvention when you break away from your kids' other parent," she says. "It's such a life-changing experience. We're still fed so many ideas about what is conventional and how you're meant to do it, and you have to reinvent when you go against what's expected."

The Glorification of Sadness goes against what is expected of Faith in a myriad of ways. After starting out in the late 2000s as a jazz cover singer, she released debut album, *Do You Want the Truth or Something Beautiful?*, in 2009 and became a fixture of the UK pop landscape for the ensuing decade.

Though that time made her a household name, the singer says she wants to use her sixth record as a corrective to her artistic integrity. Crediting herself as an executive producer on it is one of the ways in which she does this.

"I've always been an exec producer, but I've just never dug my heels in about it," she reflects. The album name, *The Glorification of Sadness*, is quite a feminist thing, and it was important for me to have a 'live by the sword, die by the sword' attitude. I've always sat next to my producer, giving comments and edits, selecting what I want to put in, but I've never been credited for it – I just got sick of it. Men get credited for it all the time, and I just thought, 'Screw that, I'm gonna bloody put my foot down about it.'"

She adds: "I do feel very lucky to have worked with the people I've worked with, and they deserve so much praise, but it's important to acknowledge myself too. I do quite a lot of therapy, and therapists always say to me, 'Would you talk to your child like that?' And I say, 'No.' And they say, 'Well, why would you talk to yourself like that?' It's not about saying, 'I'm the one who did all that,' but if no one else is gonna say what I did on my album, then it's down to me to say it."

This feminist current runs through the whole of the new album, led by impactful lead single 'How You Leave a Man'. It's also borne out by a series of collaborations, including working with Låpsley on new single 'Bad Woman'. "Not only am I super impressed by her songwriting and her as a person," Faith says of her collaborator, "but I love how she does business. She really stands up for what she deserves, and I wish I was more like that when I was her age."

The core of the new album is the intersection between this industry-facing enlightenment and the deeply personal life changes that were happening parallel to it. "Initially, I was really afraid to go to the studio because I felt so vulnerable," she explains. "It was so devastating what had happened, and it felt crass to go and write about it. That's why I called it *The Glorification of Sadness*, because I do think there's a strange relationship when you're a commercial artist and you feel like you are monetising suffering. I've written about breakups in the past, but they haven't been very serious because they've not involved kids – you can fictionalise it and create a persona. But this was so devastating, and I had some form of breakdown."

When Faith finally did go into the studio, free from any expectations of a new record and accompanied by a group of core collaborators, the story of the album began to take shape, developing as an autobiographical account of what had happened.

"I've written about breakups in the past, but this was so devastating"

YAN WASIUCHNIK

"The album is written chronologically, and it goes through all the stages of grief," she explains. "It starts kind of stable, and then it breaks down and it goes to melancholy, introspection, wild abandon, recklessness – all of those things that you do to try and get through the healing process. I wrote as I went along, and then I realised that I had to release it in order of how it happened."

This naked honesty has been as tough as it has been liberating for Faith, who has struggled through the process of writing and now promoting an album that lays out her life as candidly as this. She burst into tears during her first interview about the album, she reveals, and says she struggles to listen to album track 'Divorce', which features her children's voices, and will likely never perform it live. There is, though, an appreciation of what has been as well as a determination to move forwards, as she explains: "If you make children out of a place of love, which we did, then that's infinite. It's not a failed relationship. The album, and the children, are something that will be infinite. Our kids will have kids and so on, and the music will continue to exist too."

While Faith is wary of having to perform a balancing act between maintaining a career as a pop star and speaking her mind in an unfiltered way, the honesty of *The Glorification of Sadness* shines through with every word. "I don't want to make bad decisions and ruin my career because I think that I know better than everyone else," she says, "but it's different for a woman as well. I'm a single mum now. It sounds ridiculous because I'm a pop star, but I am also a single mum! I feel a responsibility to have a career and to be happy, but also to generate income to support us and maintain what we have. But I can't just degrade myself and become an industry prop."

The content of the music resulted in her writing a dedication, the singer says. Picking up her phone and reading it out loud, it defines the meaning of a powerful record and the enlightenment Faith has gleaned from the turbulent changes in her life. "This album is dedicated to our children," she reads, "because through them we will be together for all time, generation after generation, happily ever after. The perfect ending." ®

Flowerovlove

At 18, London star Flowerovlove is already proving a dab hand at creating indie-tinged bedroom pop, anchored by hooks that are set to see her become one of 2024's hottest talents. Recent single 'a girl like me' bounds along with an airy groove, and we can expect more of the same. "My upcoming music is going to be unhinged," she tells us. "I just know I'm really good at writing and unhinged in the sense of bringing fun to my music." We can't wait to hear more of it.

RS RECOMMENDS

OUR SHORTLIST OF THE ARTISTS SETTING THE TEMPO IN 2024

Ones to watch

Rolling Stone UK predicts the acts likely to break out in a big way this year

By NICK REILLY & WILL RICHARDS

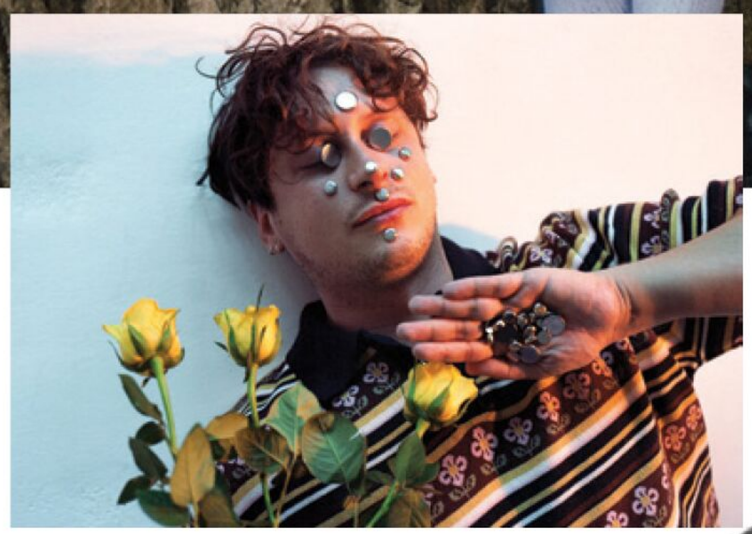
▲ Seb Lowe

If you ever find yourself at one of Seb Lowe's gigs, you'll notice five names adorning the body of the 20-year-old troubadour's guitar: Sinead O'Connor, Led Zeppelin, Eminem, Arctic Monkeys and David Bowie. They're undoubtedly an eclectic bunch, but testament to the variety in the Oldham singer's work. He can deliver punchy state-of-the-nation polemics, but he's equally comfortable creating choruses that could slay arenas — as shown on recent offering, 'Billionaire Extraordinaire'. In 2024, you wouldn't bet against Seb eventually ending up in similar-sized rooms as his heroes.

▼ Say Now

Until last summer, the group now known as Say Now didn't even have a proper name to call their own. "needanamebro" was the title instead attached to teenagers Yssy, Amelia and Maddie as they developed an online hot streak that saw them secure nearly 250,000 followers and in excess of 11 million likes on TikTok.

The lack of name is testament to two things in this group. For one, it shows the sense of humour and powerful defiance that comes across in the group's music. "*Stress is now gone, life is easier/ It's our last song, now I'm leavin*," they sing on the catchy 'S.I.N.G.L.E'.



◀ NewDad

Shoegaze is going through the unlikeliest of revivals. Take one look at TikTok and you'll see a legion of Gen Z-ers falling in love with the dream-like distortion of the genre. But where genre forebearers like My Bloody Valentine first trod, bands like NewDad are forging a fresh path.

"You're an angel / I'm just trying to be like you," comes the ethereal delivery from vocalist and guitarist Julie Dawson on 'Angel', a song taken from *Madra*, their stunning debut which arrives in late January.

Don't bet against them becoming one of 2024's defining bands.

▼ Big Special

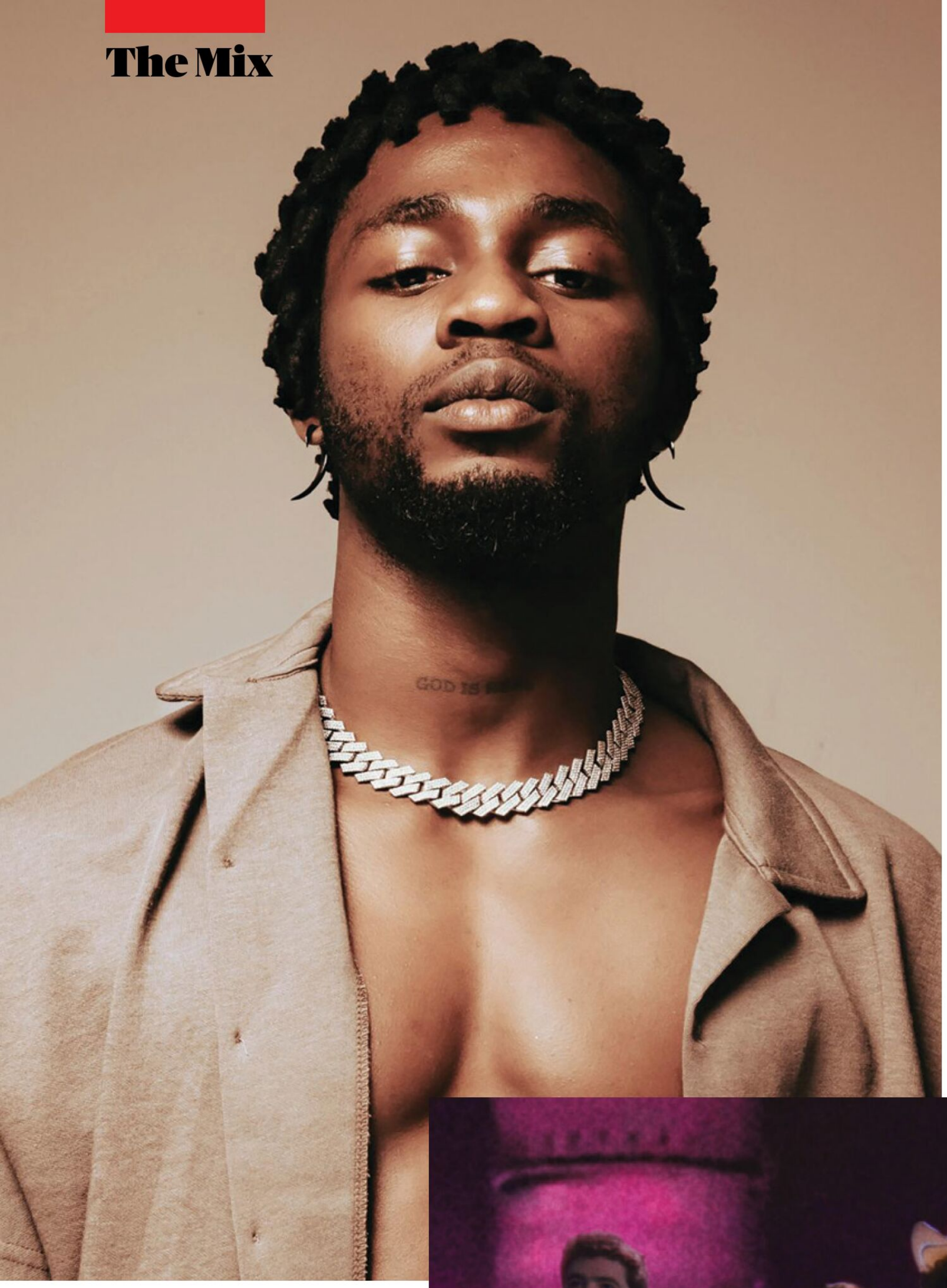
This Midlands duo appeared in our last issue, but following their sold-out UK tour last December, we truly believe that they're going to define 2024. Singer Joe Hicklin and drummer Callum Moloney are raising a scalpel to the tumultuous times we're living in and dissecting them in forensic detail. Pounding synths combined with more soulful moments help Hicklin's state-of-the-nation lyrics hit home. In 2024, expect them to resonate even more with the UK's tired and weary population.

▲ Lip Critic

The latest signings to Partisan Records epitomise why we named the company Record Label of the Year at the first Rolling Stone UK Awards, in collaboration with Rémy Martin, in 2023. This experimental New York quartet have fingers in the pies of hardcore, rock, rap and noise music, but feel tied to none of them. Instead, they make an unholy racket unrestricted by any traditional constraints. Debut Partisan single, 'It's The Magic', is a pulverising slab of noise that drinks from the same unhinged well as Death Grips but with a groovy energy that keeps you engaged. Their fervent live show is also soon to be a thing of legend.

▲ Barry Can't Swim

The success of Fred again.. and Overmono in recent years has set the table for a new wave of British dance producers to hit the mainstream. Next through the door in 2024 is surely Barry Can't Swim, the Edinburgh-born, London-based producer making inventive and sweet house beats with a pop edge. Debut album *When Will We Land?* is filled with delectable rhythms and travels from house to jazz, pop and beyond with an inquisitive nature. We predict his star will rise at this summer's festivals.



▲ Omah Lay

The latest arrival on the incredibly exciting conveyor belt of new Nigerian talent is Omah Lay, who has so far collaborated with Justin Bieber, sold out international tours and refined his brand of experimental Afro-pop. His 2022 album, *Boy Alone*, paved the way for his continued success, and 2024 looks set to be the year he truly breaks through. Lyrics about personal struggles combined with songcraft that pushes his rap background and West African influences into new and exciting realms makes him an exciting prospect.

▲ Cardinals

On their debut single, 'Roseland', Cardinals offered the most fascinating of sonic prospects — brooding indie mixed with intense shoegaze and subtle shades of their Irish folk beginnings. The result is a thing of curious brilliance and one that has led them to secure fans in high places: Fontaines D.C.'s Grian Chatten recently described the Cork group as "one of my favourite bands". High praise indeed.

▼ Fat Dog

It's only taken one song — the exuberant, fantastic 'King of the Slugs' — and a series of hype-building live shows to turn London four-piece Fat Dog into bonafide ones to watch for 2024. Vocalist Joe Love has the same sardonic delivery as most of the post-punkers who defined the last five years in British guitar music, but the band behind him takes things in a very different direction. There are hints of klezmer, gabber, dance and more in there, all defined by a sense of unhinged chaos. If this is a sign of what's coming from the offspring of The Windmill generation, we should all be very excited.

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MUSIC

Sleater-Kinney are living for today

After a shocking tragedy, the punk band found a new level of intensity in its music

By LISA TOZZI

"I HONESTLY JUST NEEDED to hear Corin sing." Carrie Brownstein was headed into a studio in Los Angeles in autumn 2022 when her friend and longtime Sleater-Kinney bandmate Corin Tucker called to give her the name and number of someone at the US Embassy in Italy. The embassy had been urgently trying to contact Brownstein and her sister for a few days, but neither had current phone numbers attached to their passports, and since Tucker is listed as Brownstein's emergency contact, the embassy got hold of her. Tucker suspected some kind of scam or prank, but just in case it wasn't, she made the call.

Brownstein gave her sister the info and headed in to work. About two hours later, when she took a break, she saw a missed call from her sister. When she phoned back, she received devastating news: their mother and stepfather had been killed in a car crash four days earlier while holidaying in Italy.

Brownstein and Tucker had been working on a new Sleater-Kinney album before the accident; many of the songs had been written. But the sudden, shocking tragedy shook up the pair's usual process, where they'd share vocal responsibilities. "I felt like I needed to play guitar," Brownstein says. "I didn't really have the strength to sing."

A year later, Brownstein and Tucker are telling the story of *Little Rope*, the band's 11th album, over Zoom. It is a late-autumn afternoon in Portland, Oregon, and they are each in their own homes, with dogs snoozing just off-camera. "The whole tone of the album changed when the accident happened," Tucker says. "It was a real experience of loss. And I think that touched all of the songs."

Navigating loneliness and grief, and the vulnerability that comes from realising how much you need the people you love, are familiar to anyone who has lived through the past three-plus years. Those messy feelings forged *Little Rope*, animating choices from a twist of melody to a reworking of an already-written song. But it's far from a bummer of an album. There's an excitement and an urgency.

Sleater-Kinney have always been one of the most ferocious bands in rock: pounding lyrics sharp and strong, demanding respect, and wrapping together the personal and political. Tucker's impassioned wail and Brownstein's wild shredding inspired a passionate fandom, especially among women who felt they had a rock band that was really speaking to them.

Brownstein and Tucker put out seven albums in 10 years before going on hiatus in 2006. The band's second act – which has now lasted almost as many years as its first one – began in 2015 with the triumphant LP *No Cities to Love*. But this new era has also marked big changes: drummer Janet Weiss, who'd been with the band since 1997, left in 2019, saying her role in Sleater-Kinney had shifted and she "didn't fit" anymore.

Though there were some hurt feelings at the time, the three women have stayed in touch. "We text on birthdays," Brownstein says. "It's like family. I think that is a dynamic that transcends band changes."

After nearly three decades together, Tucker and Brownstein could probably finish each other's sentences – but they don't, and you get the feeling it's because they genuinely enjoy hearing each other talk. This creative partnership has been hard-fought, and they are fiercely protective of it.

Brownstein and Tucker – 49 and 51 years old, respectively – say they are inspired by artists like Lucinda Williams, 70. "I mean, I think we want to keep going," says Tucker.

"This album, to me, signals the next era of Sleater-Kinney," Brownstein says. "It feels like a reclamation of all that I love about playing music with Corin. And so, I'm going to be very careful with that and try to enjoy it, because you don't know when it could end." ®

FAST FACTS

HOWL Producer John Congleton urged Tucker to unleash her most intense vocals: "I was like, 'Just fucking go for it'"

ON THE RADAR Some of Tucker's and Brownstein's current faves: Rosalía, Palehound, Blondshell and Olivia Rodrigo

"I felt like I needed to play guitar," Brownstein says. "I didn't really have the strength to sing"

HAIR BY DENNIS GOTS WITH FORWARD ARTISTS; MAKEUP BY ROB RUMSEY AT A-FRAME AGENCY

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Zhamak Fullad**

DJ STARS

Uncle Waffles' road show

As the in-demand DJ embarks on her first headlining tour, we got a look at the vibrant world of Uncle Waffles

By MANKAPRR CONTEH

WHEN UNCLE WAFFLES left her Manhattan hotel for her first headlining show, in Brooklyn, her fiery-red hair was full of bounce and curves. By the time she plays 'Tanzania', her first single after rising to prominence as a DJ specialising in South African amapiano, it instead flows kinkily down her back, tested by time, sweat and the heat from the sea of bodies in the sold-out crowd at Avant Gardner, an entertainment complex spanning a whole city block.

'Tanzania' — produced by Waffles and South African multi-hyphenate Tony Duardo — is dynamic and intense, with layers of thrilling percussion and haunting lilts by vocalists Sino Msolo and BoiBizza. It was even worked into a dance break on Beyoncé's *Renaissance* world tour. It's an absolute heater, and the venue is already hot. There are people wall to wall and flames shooting up from the blasters behind Waffles, a part of the set design.

As a DJ, Waffles doesn't just spin amapiano, a dance genre surging in popularity and often distinguished by the deep knocks of a log drum in it. She really puts on a show. Dancers hired locally for this one are doing intricate footwork, a mob of them waving their arms in the air and swaying themselves from the front of the stage ahead of Waffles' sturdy table down the stairs of the platform they're on, leaving her solo. For a second, she looks up and opens her palms like an acceptance of blessings, and then her feet stomp and step to the music with a power that shoots up her body. Her thighs pop and pulse, and her hips follow, then her shoulders. After a few moments, her body relaxes, she glides to her right, bites her bottom lip, and smiles.

"Especially on social media, if you see a female DJ dancing, it's always, 'She doesn't even DJ, what is she even doing? Everyone's just a fake nowadays,'" Waffles says

The 23-year-old, born Lungelihle Zwane, first learnt to DJ in 2020 while interning at a TV station in her native Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland). She then honed her skills with eight-hour practice sessions over the course of the early Covid-19 pandemic. Her breakout moment came when she took the spot of a DJ who didn't show up to play a party she was attending, says Kai, one of her managers, who encouraged her to play that night.

"She takes the moment without any fear or hesitation, and she plays that set," he recalls. Videos from it went viral, with Waffles spinning Young Stunna's 'Adiwele' as the crowd hung on to her every move, even mimicking her like she was a dance captain. She's gorgeous and contorts slickly, her face bright and flipping through a million expressions. I certainly had never seen a DJ dance like that at work. "I'm like, 'Oh, my God, she's a star,'" Kai remembers. Her show in Brooklyn proved to be no different.

"This is supposed to be a show that can showcase why a DJ can headline," Waffles told me in the weeks preceding her debut. She cites DJs Metro Boomin and Tale of Us as performance influences, but also Beyoncé and Travis Scott. "There's not a lot of DJs who put on a full spectacle," she says.

Being a spectacle in and of herself is part of Waffles' appeal, but as a woman DJ'ing, that's also been a double-edged sword. Critics often assume it's a replacement for talent. "Especially on social media, if you see a female DJ dancing, it's always, 'She doesn't even DJ, what is she even doing? Everyone's just a fake DJ nowadays,'" Uncle Waffles says. But, she adds, "they also consider you boring if you don't bring something unique into the DJ space because they feel like males should be the ones who DJ... They always want to make women feel inadequate, no matter what."

UNCLE WAFFLES HAS spent most of the year playing festivals and parties around the globe as one of the biggest names in amapiano. In 2021, #amapiano on TikTok had slightly more than 570 million views. Today, it has 12.9 billion. 'Water', an

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Yè Fan

◀ HOMELAND DANCE
Waffles called on choreographer Lee-ché Janecke (left) and pole dancers as extensions of herself, adding South African style through Janecke's routines and the bold, acrobatic femininity she loves. "In South Africa," Janecke says, "usually there's a lot of artists, but nobody's pushing the boundaries."

▼ A NEW YORK WELCOME
This was her first time building a show from scratch. "Usually, you get booked for gigs and you play according to all the things that they've created, how they've promoted it," Waffles says of being hired. She chose New York for her first run from prior success in the city. "Clearly, people know the sound."

◀ GLOBAL SENSATION
"Amapiano is like the style that I love the most. It's the main style that I do, actually," says Aaron Fleming, a 23-year-old dancer from Washington, DC, who performed with Waffles. Fleming was born and raised in the US Virgin Islands when dancehall became a global sensation, and he sees a similar trajectory for amapiano. "I'm just seeing how Afrobeats did that in 2018, and South African music is now making its come-up. I just love seeing how Black people are able to do that over and over."

▶ BIRTH OF A USERNAME
Waffles got her moniker from a song about the breakfast food in the animated series *Teen Titans Go!* In high school, her friends would annoy her by singing it. "Because I didn't like it, it was like, 'OK, we're going to then call you Waffles.'" Later on, when she was joining Instagram after high school, her friends had the idea that she should make her screen name "Uncle Waffles", incorporating a trend of people addressing each other as uncle in the region, she says.

PRAYERS UP
"I'm a firm believer in just praying it away," Waffles says. "If fear comes in, I always just pray. And I'm just like, 'This is never a mistake.' Where I am is not a mistake, so there's no need for me to be scared."

◀ LADY IN RED
Makeup artist Scott Osbourne Jr cheerily did Uncle Waffles' makeup in her quiet Manhattan hotel room. While he painted her face with a big smile on his, hairstylist Myllah Harper sat in the wide bathroom. Harper and Waffles went for a fiery-red wig for vibrancy, she says. Waffles wore a similar colour DJ'ing Michaela Coel's (*Wakanda Forever*) Met Gala afterparty this year, attended by stars including Naomi Campbell, Stormzy and Letitia Wright.

amapiano-indebted song by South African singer Tyla, has taken the internet by storm, and is currently in the top 10 of the *Billboard* Hot 100. Waffles has her perform at her Brooklyn show as well.

In her day-to-day life, Uncle Waffles is a far cry from the firebrand she is onstage. "I'm a naturally reserved person," she tells me via text weeks later. "I rarely am ever extremely energetic in my life." She's nearly silent as her hair and makeup are being done meticulously in her hotel room before the show. The room is huge and luxurious, with a fireplace burning behind a glass case and MTV's *Ridiculousness* roaring from a large TV, puncturing the silence. She's also having some nerves, her publicist tells me. Waffles later texts me that she is always nervous before her performances. "I always want to give my best," she says.

When we head to her van to commute to Avant Gardner, Kai says he needs oxtails, a massage and a nap after the run they've had — more than 100 shows by September 2023, with just two weeks at home in South Africa, where Waffles has built her career. She's still quiet in the van, fiddling with her phone. She's even mostly unmoved while her publicist blasts her own music on the van's speakers. She eventually asks if we can hear some Ice Spice. This kicks off a playlist of women in rap, to which Waffles dances and sings along to Ice Spice's 'Deli', GloRilla and Cardi B's 'Tomorrow 2', and what seems like the crown jewel of the ride for Waffles, Nicki Minaj's 'Did It On'em'.

When we park behind the venue, photographers snap portraits of Waffles as she poses beside the van, the wind glamorously blowing her locks. A pack of us — venue staff, photographers, management, security — push through a narrow hall in the complex's outdoor innards, passing a maze of hardware that powers its varied stages. We take a tower of grated metal stairs to Waffles' green room, which is actually white and brick. The dancers she's hired are already there, and chant to welcome her: "Waffles, we want to party!" It's a custom at her gigs.

Waffles doesn't always have dancers perform with her, but with movement being the beating heart of amapiano, she incorporates them into her larger sets, like when she played Coachella for the first time last year, as the first amapiano act to perform at the famous festival.

"The biggest thing is getting dancers that know how to dance the genre very, very well. Yes, everyone can do the TikTok dances," she says of the simpler routines that have gone viral, like the hand-heavy dance to her latest hit, 'Yahyuppiyah'.

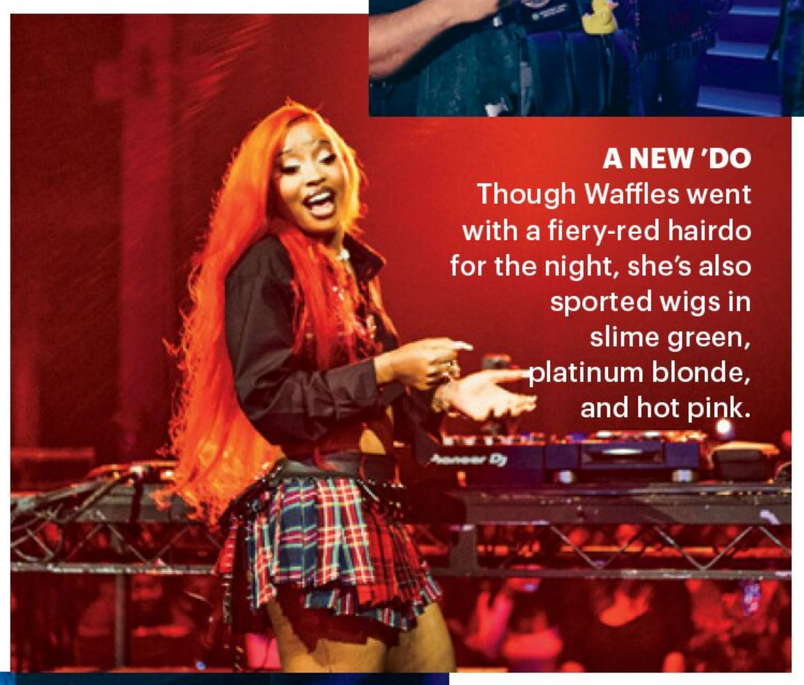
Since all her dancers tonight are US-based and thus disconnected from South African dance culture, she flew in a choreographer from home, Lee-ché Janecke. He says he began working with Waffles after she direct-messaged him ahead of her second EP, *Asylum*, which came out in March 2023. He also choreographs for Tyla, whose 'Water' is taking off in no small part to its booty-moving dance. The song debuted at number 67 on the Hot 100 three weeks after her guest slot in Waffles' headline debut. It quickly became a trend on TikTok and Instagram, where dancers mimicking Tyla poured bottles of water down their backs as they gyrated, with their cameras filming from behind them.

Janecke landed just four days before the show and worked with the dancers to piece its routines together with only about four hours of rehearsal each day. In the green room, the dancers rehash bits of their routines, with Waffles delicately hyping them before joining. She doesn't practise the moves full out, instead limply miming the steps and formations one last time. Along with Tyla, she booked DJs mOma, Sydney Love, AQ, and 2wo Bunnies as supporting acts. The crowd and music below the green room are a constant dull roar in the background. Waffles and the dancers eventually gather around a large, messy vanity to take shots of Jägermeister, with whom she has a brand partnership. She pours the liquor into their plastic cups one by one.

When it's almost time to hit the stage, Waffles and her expansive team crowd the dark stairs from the green room to the main floor, passing another small, exclusive level overlooking the venue on the way. The mouth of the stairs opens directly into the crowd, and the path to the stage is through it. Waffles stands at the steps closest to the floor. She's enlisted pole dancers to perform in addition to the troupe in her green room, and they make their way out first from the midlevel lounge, with Waffles holding out a hand to help them down the steps in their massive heels. When her dance troupe passes through next, she cheers them on with one rooting fist and one open palm to escort them as well.

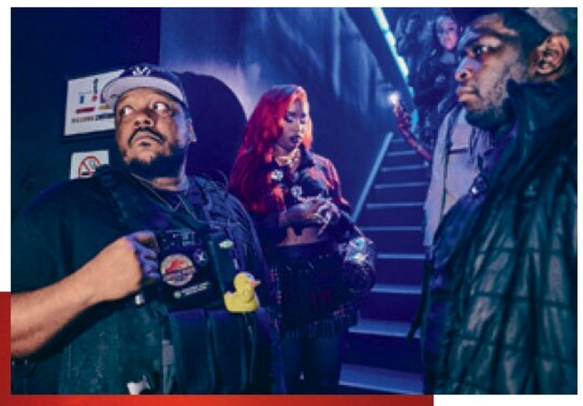
The house lights come down and cellphone lights blast up as the dancers filter behind the stage, a high platform parked in the middle of the venue's outer edge. Kai, now playing hype man on a microphone, leads another chant of "Waffles, we want to party!" But this time, it's massive. Waffles leans against the staircase wall and peers into the fray ever so slightly, a soft, pensive smile on her face. After four or five rounds, she descends onto the ground, ushered by a man in a black Prada bucket hat. She's welcomed to her decks with a "Ladies and gentlemen, make some noise for the queen, Uncle Waffles!" ®

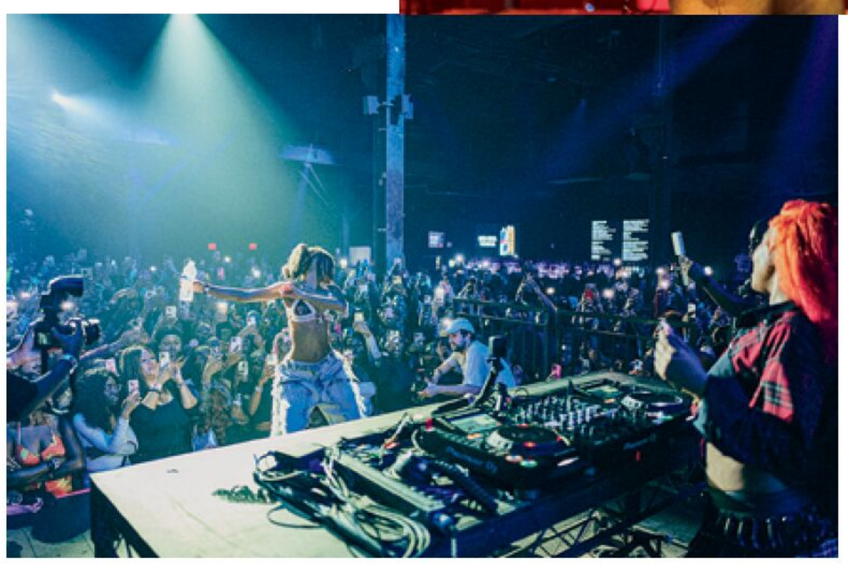
▲ A VIRAL MOMENT
After a full night of performing, Waffles still made space to dance with Tyla, recording a few takes of the routine to Tyla's single 'Water', which lit up the web, and is currently in the top 10 of the *Billboard* Hot 100.



A NEW 'DO
Though Waffles went with a fiery-red hairdo for the night, she's also sported wigs in slime green, platinum blonde, and hot pink.

▼ SECURING THE BAG
After escorting her dancers down the stairs that opened into the venue, Waffles waited to make her way through the crowd to her decks. Her Louis Vuitton Miroir Gold Papillon handbag purse rarely left her side.





◀ DANCE FEVER
After Waffles and her dancers lit the stage, 21-year-old South African singer Tyla emerged to perform her viral hit 'Water'. The song blends pop, R&B, Afrobeats, and amapiano; its waist-whining dance taking off on social media is in the South African style of Bacardi.

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The greatest show on earth!

The inaugural Rolling Stone UK Awards, in collaboration with Rémy Martin, were presented at Camden's legendary Roundhouse in November. The stars came out to play, and with Munya Chawawa as host – for one night only – we rocked the world a little bit harder...

TWO YEARS on from the launch of the world's greatest music, entertainment and popular culture magazine in the UK, the stars came out in force for the inaugural Rolling Stone UK Awards, in collaboration with Rémy Martin.

The Roundhouse in north London's Camden was the chosen venue for a November night to remember, and it proved as iconic a collision of two legendary music brands as you can envisage.

The red carpet was taken over by a buzzing guest list of today's hottest acts, established artists and those currently breaking through. From Nia Archives, Cat Burns, Rachel Chinouriri, Jodie Harsh and Vick Hope to Harry Judd, Nell Mescal, Mae Muller, AJ Odudu, Billy Porter and Busted, countless stars of screen and stage were chauffeured to the venue in style by our car partner Volvo.

Following a welcome cocktail reception and an epic three-course dinner served to almost 400 guests, at the heart of the incredible music awards show – inevitably – was stand-out live music.

First to take the stage, after the

▲ SET THE STAGE
Winners of The Rising Star Award, The Last Dinner Party, wowed with their performance of 'My Lady of Mercy'

▼ LAUGHING MATTERS
Our host Munya Chawawa kept us on our toes with timely quips and satirical sideswipes

welcome address, were The Last Dinner Party – who would later win The Rising Star Award, supported by Moving Venue – as they kicked off proceedings with the track 'My Lady of Mercy'. "Thank you," they said, "for allowing us to sing about Catholic shame before you've had wine." Fair enough, though it wasn't just wine, it was M&S wine, so we felt no shame at all.

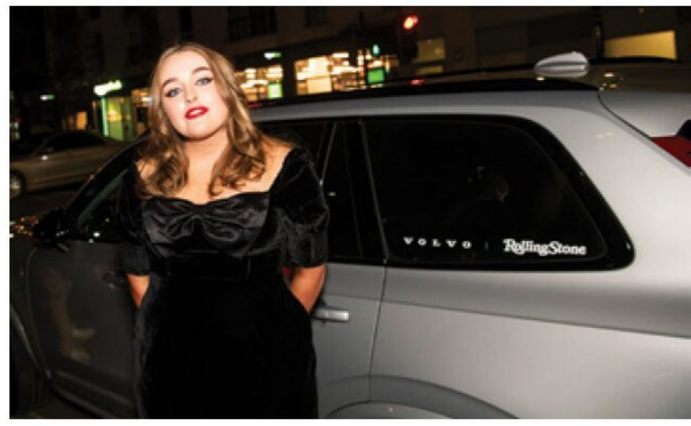
The Live Act Award nominee Louis Tomlinson then tore the roof off to open the show proper, with a performance of smash hit 'Out of My System', before The Song of the Year nominee Kenya Grace performed her stellar number one, 'Strangers'. There was something for everyone, confirming Rolling Stone UK's unique position as a multi-genre title.

In between times, consummate host Munya Chawawa steered a show peppered by the great and good, delivering both good humour and some well-timed barbs, and welcoming to the stage a shimmering array of presenters ranging from Clara Amfo and Aisling Bea to the Nova Twins.

When it was time for the gongs to be handed out, AJ Odudu came on stage to present The Album Award, supported by Brooklands Studio,

▲ **NEW DIRECTION**
The Live Act Award nominee Louis Tomlinson delivered a no-holds-barred performance of his rock/punk single 'Out of My System'

▼ **JUMP IN MY RIDE**
Our car partner, Volvo, delivering precious cargo: the presenters of The Festival Award the Nova Twins (top), and Nell Mescal (below)



▼ **OVERNIGHT SENSATION**
The Song of the Year nominee Kenya Grace regaled us with her number one hit, 'Strangers', which was written and recorded in her bedroom

to The Chemical Brothers for their phenomenal tenth record, *For That Beautiful Feeling*. Meanwhile, The Artist Award, in collaboration with Rémy Martin, was presented by a fabulously attired Billy Porter to Jessie Ware, who glowed with joy as she accepted the recognition in a year that saw her receive her second Mercury Prize nomination for fifth album *That! Feels Good!*

Actor/director Daniel Kaluuya brought things full circle when he accepted The Film Award, in collaboration with Rémy Martin, for his directorial debut *The Kitchen*, crediting the support that the Roundhouse offers young British talent as an important stepping stone in his own career.

Author and podcast presenter Juno Dawson presented The Television Award. It went to a resurgent *Doctor Who*, which that very evening was celebrating 60 years since the first episode aired. It was accepted on behalf of the BBC by fan favourite David Tennant. The Tenth and Fourteenth Doctor gave a rousing speech on the power of the Time Lord: "At a moment like this in the world, we're celebrating a show that is about someone travelling around in time and space in a wooden box dispensing kindness, a character who travels through time

NO ORDINARY MAN
When Ozzy Osbourne could not fly to the UK ceremony for health reasons, his wife Sharon Osbourne and friend Yungblud collected his Icon Award

and space cherishing the unusual and standing up for the disenfranchised," he said to applause. "May the spirit of the TARDIS carry us through the next 60 years." Amen to that!

Skepta made a special appearance to celebrate The Trailblazer Award winner Digga D, who delivered an empowering speech on the importance of not being defined by our past and allowing space for growth and change in people and for their art to flourish.

The emotional moments continued as Roman Kemp accepted The Gamechanger Award on behalf of Lewis Capaldi, who couldn't attend due to taking some necessary time away from the spotlight for his mental health. Kemp shared an important message about knowing when to put your own wellbeing first.

The Breakthrough Award, supported by Volvo, went to the 'Good Witch' Maisie Peters, who in 2023 scored a number one album, stole the show on the Pyramid Stage at Glastonbury and sold out Wembley Arena. There could be no other winner.

The night climaxed with the presentation of The Rolling Stone Icon Award, supported by Visit West Hollywood. The Live Act Award winner, the rocker Yungblud, returned to the stage to hail his mentor and hero Ozzy Osbourne who, due to doctor's orders issued just two days before the event, was not able to attend in person. Following an emotional video message, the legend's wife and manager Sharon Osbourne spoke movingly in paying tribute to her husband's phenomenal legacy, which led to a standing ovation for a man who truly rocks the world.

As the awards show wrapped, it was over to TheMenWhoFell2Earth DJs Tony Fletcher and Mark Wood to carry us through to 2am at the Rémy Martin after-party. Both tunes and cocktails were served.

The Rolling Stone UK Awards will return in November.

The Winners

The Icon Award
supported by Visit West Hollywood
Ozzy Osbourne, presented by Yungblud, accepted by Sharon Osbourne

The Artist Award
in collaboration with Rémy Martin
Jessie Ware, presented by Billy Porter

The Film Award
in collaboration with Rémy Martin
Daniel Kaluuya for *The Kitchen*, presented by Clara Amfo

The Breakthrough Award
supported by Volvo
Maisie Peters, presented by Aisling Bea

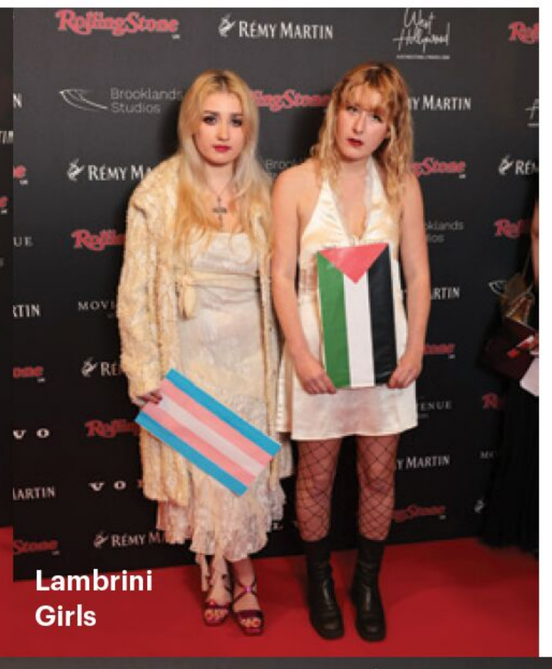
The Album Award
supported by Brooklands Studio
The Chemical Brothers for *For That Beautiful Feeling*, presented by AJ Odudu

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Aaron Parsons and Kit Oates**

WISH YOU THE BEST
Collecting The Gamechanger Award on behalf of Lewis Capaldi, who is currently taking a break, Roman Kemp spoke about how important it is for artists to put their health first: "To be able to say, 'I'm not going to walk out in front of thousands of people, I'm not gonna walk out to adoring fans to sing my name every night. I'm gonna go back and look after myself.' That, my friends, is a real fucking rockstar. That's Lewis Capaldi."

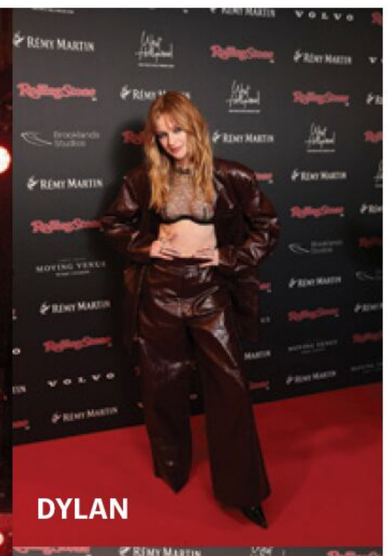
DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE
As he collected The Television Award for *Doctor Who* on the exact day of the show's 60th anniversary, David Tennant pronounced it "a very jolly birthday present" before saying: "At a moment like this in the world, we're celebrating a show that is about someone travelling around in time and space in a wooden box dispensing kindness. It's a character who travels through time and space cherishing the unusual and standing up for the disenfranchised. May the spirit of the TARDIS carry us through the next 60 years."

Rachel Chinouriri



Lambrini Girls

Billy Porter presented The Artist Award, in collaboration with Rémy Martin



DYLAN

AJ Odudu

Lovejoy

The Rising Star Award
supported by Moving Venue
The Last Dinner Party, presented by Busted

The Song of the Year Award
PinkPantheress, for 'Boy's A Liar Pt 2', presented by Vick Hope

The Record Label Award
Partisan Records, presented by James Barr

The Festival Award
Download Festival, presented by Nova Twins

The Live Act Award
Yungblud, presented by Jodie Harsh

The Television Award
Doctor Who, presented by Juno Dawson, accepted by David Tennant

The Gamechanger Award
Lewis Capaldi, presented and accepted by Roman Kemp

The Trailblazer Award
Digga D, presented by Skepta

▼ LOUD AND CLEAR
After picking up The Live Act Award from Jodie Harsh, Yungblud said: "Live music and live playing is everything to me. It's all I ever wanted to do." He added: "In a world of artificial intelligence, you can't fucking beat human connection. You can't beat pouring your heart out on stage." Finally, he said: "British music means everything to me."

▲ ALTERED EGO
After picking up The Trailblazer Award, Digga D said: "If there's young people watching this right now, my advice would be to listen to some of the people that care about you, but to follow your gut. If I didn't follow my gut, I wouldn't be up here right now."

▼ FEELS GOOD
Accepting The Artist Award, in collaboration with Rémy Martin, Jessie Ware said that winning it "means a lot". Thanking her management, she said: "They were so enthusiastic, and they believed in me so much, probably more than I believed in myself."

▼ MULTI-HYPHENATE
Actor, producer, writer and now director Daniel Kaluuya picked up The Film Award, in collaboration with Rémy Martin, for *The Kitchen*, alongside two of its stars, Hope Ikpoko Jr and Jedaiah Bannerman.

Speaking about the film, Kaluuya said: "With co-director Kibwe Tavares, the breakthrough moment was when we stopped wanting to be great, and we wanted to be honest. It just opened the doors to what was possible."

He added: "We wanted to make something exciting for London, for Britain and the world."

▲ PLAY IT BY EAR
Collecting The Record Label Award for Partisan Records, the label's vice president Jeff Bell said it was "quite an honour", before adding: "Thanks to our artists for trusting us with their art."

◀ PUT A SPELL ON YOU
The winner of The Breakthrough Award, supported by Volvo, Maisie Peters thanked her sister, who, when her first song came out, said it was "like shit Ed Sheeran". "Look at me now!" said Peters.

▼ GOOD LIBATIONS
(From the top) Courtesy of M&S, we drank Expressions Carmenere red wine and Found Manzoni Bianco. Our collaborator Rémy Martin provided some delicious cognac cocktails including the Like a Rolling Stone spritz, a Wonderwall highball, a Purple Rain old-fashioned and a Back to Black espresso martini. There were also homegrown tipples with Sussex Haze DDH Pale Ale and Session India Pale Ale by 360° Brewing.

▲ DINNER IS SERVED
The Last Dinner Party won The Rising Star Award, supported by Moving Venue. Accepting it from Busted, lead singer Abigail Morris said: "This is the first award we've won, so thanks a lot! We're just some friends that sing... Tara is our manager — thank you, Tara. We're very thankful for this; it's very nice and sweet. Thank you, Rolling Stone UK magazine! Thank you, Sharon Osbourne, for just being here! Thank you for listening to us sing about Catholic guilt before you'd even had any wine. Long live rock'n'roll! It's not dead!"

▶ LISTEN UP
(Top right) After winning The Festival Award for Download, festival booker Andy Copping said: "We're in our 21st year, and we've done our very very best to make our festival more diverse, and slowly we're getting there. Thank you, Rolling Stone UK, for recognising us." (Below right) Picking up The Album Award, supported by Brooklands Studio, for *For That Beautiful Feeling*, Tom Rowlands of The Chemical Brothers said it was "still nice to be recognised for what we do".

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DUA LIPA IS GIVING US EVERYTHING

After a whirlwind couple of years, the wildly ambitious pop star is embracing freedom and fun — both in her life and on her upcoming album. As she kicks off a new era, she lets us into her dreams, her anxieties, and what she wants to stand for

BY BRITTANY SPANOS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL BAILEY-GATES

PATIENCE

"I AM LITERALLY GETTING THROWN INTO LIFE RIGHT NOW."

Dua Lipa is thinking about her Saturn return as she says this. At 28, she's deep in it now, but the astrology-loving star had been anticipating the foreboding planetary event for a while. It's a cosmic coming of age, usually when people are at the cusp of 30, marked by tons of transitions and transformations and upheaval. Lipa – who's about to start an entirely new chapter in her career – is feeling it all.

"It drags you by your feet," Lipa says in her north London lilt, relishing the chaos a bit. "I thought 28 was going to be so cute."

We're seated on the now-empty patio at Gjelina, a popular restaurant on Abbot Kinney Boulevard, a trendy street in LA's Venice Beach. (She sheepishly admits that her love for the show *Californication* made her want to see this street before she ever visited Los Angeles.) Lipa pulled up to lunch alone, weaving through once-packed tables in her tweed car coat, T-shirt, jeans and sunglasses. Her hair, dyed a deep, mulled-wine red, makes her stick out immediately – which might be why the owner, who knows her dad and is also of Albanian descent, sends over a free dessert. "Albanians everywhere," she says with a shrug.

She's slightly jet-lagged, having landed from London a few days earlier. Two days before her flight, she released her new single, 'Houdini', a neo-psychedelic dance-floor rager. The next morning, Grammy nominations were announced, and she found out her *Barbie* hit, 'Dance the Night', was up for two awards, including Song of the Year. "I didn't even know they were coming out that day!" she says. She celebrated by going to her friend's DJ set, and admits she was kind of hungover for her flight.

But in between such big moments and celebrations, Lipa has been figuring out a lot about herself. Her highly anticipated third album is due later this year, and it captures a period of major changes in her life, including the end of a relationship and her forays into dating. She also parted ways with the management firm that represented her for a decade and bought back the rights to her music. Beyond that, she's been planting seeds and piling up projects that include her Service95 newsletter, movie roles and a production company, plotting out exactly what she wants to do in the future.

"I'm being thrown into learning lessons of resilience," she says, "lessons of maybe not having to be so strong all the time and being OK with that." She searches for the words a bit. "I don't know... I'm learning so much about myself."

Lipa may have already been more resilient than she realised. Look no further than her origin story: at 15, she famously persuaded her family to let her leave Kosovo and moved back to London, where she was born, completely alone. She finished school, passed her A-levels, and began waiting tables and modelling while seeking out a team and label to get her music career off the ground. Before she turned 20, she was signed.

In the years leading up to and following the release of her 2017 self-titled debut, Lipa hustled in the studio and on the road, playing festivals and opening for Troye Sivan, Bruno Mars and Coldplay. The work paid off with hits like 'New Rules' and a Best New Artist Grammy Award. Then, in 2020, her hyper-glam disco revival *Future Nostalgia* became a pandemic blockbuster that climbed the charts and launched her into main-pop-girl territory.

The album was a rebel yell for Lipa. It became an unlikely soundtrack for millions of people during lockdown, and made disco a ubiquitous trend in pop for the next few years. And with her warm, soulful voice, mixed with her undeniable self-assuredness, Lipa became the pop diva ready to meet an uncertain moment.

While she's one of the most-streamed artists in the world, she's also your favourite rock star's favourite pop star: when Elton John isn't calling her up for lavish dinners, Mick Jagger is busting a move with her at his Christmas party. "We had a full dance party, dancing with Mick Jagger in his living room," she says, laughing. She breaks into a light impression of Jagger: "He's like, 'All right, babe! Let's go, darling!'"

Last summer, Trent Reznor said that he found 'Levitating' so "well-crafted" it made him tear up. ("That was too, too cool," Lipa says, smiling widely.) Recently, for her Service95 book club, Lipa spoke to Patti Smith, one of her heroes. Smith shared that she had seen a picture of Lipa in a chain-mail dress at the *Barbie* premiere and instantly thought of Joan of Arc. "Sometimes when I'm talking about things like this, I'm like, 'It feels weird that I am even talking about myself,'" Lipa says.

OPENING SPREAD: COAT BY FERRAGAMO, JEANS BY CELINE BY HEDI SLIMANE; PREVIOUS SPREAD: COAT BY FEAR OF GOD

Lipa is everywhere, but many critics feel they have barely cracked the surface of who she is. She slipped so easily between genres that her sound, and personality, came off as inscrutable earlier in her career. Glimpses into her life outside of the spotlight would come in frequent but well-curated waves on her Instagram, the only social platform she runs herself. For her, music is a job – and her personal life remains just that. "I like to just live my life, do my photo dump, write my songs, and dip," she explains. "I'm not interested in trying to be controversial or do something for a reaction."

Her poise and disinterest in drama often leads people to cast her as a guarded, too-perfect pop bot. Jokes and criticism that she's not trying hard enough, not giving enough, have hurt her. In the middle of all this self-discovery, Lipa's been figuring out how to create more distance from the noise around her.

"It's always so easy with social media to get caught up in a negative spiral or people being mean, telling you what they think about you without really knowing you at all. It's already so far-fetched, maybe, for some people to think that you have feelings or that you get upset," she says. "For me, I think it's just important to be able to take things with a pinch of salt."

As unfazed as she may seem, some comments do sting. Take the reactions to something as innocuous as Lipa kicking back on vacation. After her *Future Nostalgia* tour wrapped at the end of November 2022, Lipa spent the beginning of 2023 travelling the world with her family and friends. Fans dubbed her the "*vacanza* queen", commenting about how she's never home since her Instagram feed was full of photo dumps from places like Cannes and Ibiza.

"I think people are quick to forget," she says. "I was on tour up until the end of December. I felt like I missed out on so much time with my family and friends. It shows how short our attention span is, which is why music comes out so much faster."

And then for just a second, she bristles slightly, exhausted by how something so harmless has been getting picked apart. "Of course, I was going to fucking holiday and chill [during] the year that I was just going in the studio and had some time off. As long as I'm doing my job, hitting my deadlines, and getting my shit done, then I will find a way to relax, too. It's really work hard and play hard. Why not?"

Lipa is working hard now. Her fans are eagerly awaiting her third album, which they've nicknamed DL3. She isn't quite ready to reveal the actual title, but she shares that it's a psychedelic-pop-infused tribute to UK rave culture. It's heavily inspired by acts like Primal Scream and Massive Attack, staples for a London girl with a penchant for late-night drives around her city. Even her aesthetic is a total 180 from her last era, toning down the glam, sparkly bodysuits in an effort to evoke the "don't give a fuck-ness" of Brit-pop acts like Oasis and Blur, more touchstones for her new music.

"This record feels a bit more raw," she says. "I want to capture the essence of youth and freedom and having fun and just letting things happen, whether it's good or bad. You can't change it. You just have to roll with the punches of whatever's happening in your life."

But Dua is still Dua, and she hasn't lost any of the command and drive that's brought her this far, even with her Saturn return serving up new lessons every day. There's a ton she's planning right now, and she's going to give her fans everything, even while taking things in her stride. "I'm trying to move with a lightness, like 'nothing is the end of the world,'" she says. "Whatever happens is exactly the way it's supposed to be."

JUST A WEEK EARLIER, before our lunch date in LA, Lipa was at home in London. It was November, and the city was characteristically dreary, the sky grey and the streets dusted with intermittent rain. From the outside, her house looks like a foreboding, industrial-style warehouse, locked down, gated and brick-walled. She settled down here in December 2022 and lives near her childhood home and teenage haunts – she fondly points out that there's a club nearby where she saw J. Cole's first UK tour.

Walking into her house feels a little like stepping from a black-and-white landscape into full Technicolor: it might seem like a fortress from the outside, but like Lipa, the interior is sophisticated and inviting, full of thoughtfully curated decorations and cosy furniture fit for the numerous dinner parties she hosts here. Oversize orange and white couches surround heavy granite coffee tables. Against one wall is a walnut cabinet accented with trinkets and a copy of Patti Smith's *M Train*. A giant colour wheel looms over her white record player, while on the same wall hangs a collage of the Muppets painted by the art collective FriendsWithYou. On the bench below, a crate of records has an Oasis bootleg perched at the front, alongside a few artfully placed vintage books that include William A. Emboden's history of hallucinogenic botanicals, *Narcotic Plants*, and the screenplay for *Paris, Texas*.

Lipa is wrapping up a meeting with her team in another part of the house, but within minutes, she walks into the living room. She is in the middle of a promotional blitz that includes radio appearances, photo shoots and social media content. Though she's dressed down in jeans and a Palace Unitas sweatshirt, her eyes are done up in a heavy, smoked-out cat eye from an on-camera appearance that morning. Her red hair is down, except for two tiny, face-framing braids.

Lipa began working on new music in 2021, long before her *Future Nostalgia* tour started. At the time, it was still unclear if there would even *be* a tour, given all of the pandemic-related delays and health concerns. "I was like, 'I might as well get back in the studio and start working on a new project.' And for me, I just have to write a lot until I get my idea."

The album didn't take shape until after the second leg of her yearlong tour was over. The exact date – maybe it was June? Lipa's brow furrows as she tries to remember, and because she needs to be precise, she jumps off the orange couch we're sitting on and walks toward the seemingly normal, white brick wall next to us. It turns out it's actually a secret doorway to her bedroom.

"It's so heavy," she groans, struggling to pry it open. But she returns holding a thick notebook that she purchased from CVS that's covered in abstract, absent-minded Dua doodles. The pages are filled with notes and handwritten lyrics, and she flips to the date in question – July 2022 – which is when she first met Tame Impala's Kevin Parker. "I was so nervous because I'm just such a fan of Kevin's," Lipa says.

Parker, she remembers, "was quite shy in the beginning". She invited him to a session with three other people she had been working with that summer: her longtime collaborator Caroline Ailin, who co-wrote 'Don't Start Now' and 'New Rules', electronica auteur Danny L Harle (Caroline Polachek, Charli XCX), and folky-pop balladeer Tobias Jesso Jr (Adele, Niall Horan). Putting these four disparate musical personalities together was a risky gamble that paid off.

"After a while, we all just loosened up together," Lipa recalls. By the end of the first day at London's 5DB, the group had "a really good" song. By the end of the week, they had three. "I remember thinking it was a genius move to get that combination of people together," Parker says. "Like, hats off to her."

Lipa refers to this particular group as her "band"; they ended up making eight of the 11 tracks on the album. Outside of Ailin, everyone was mostly new to her. She admits that she had been apprehensive about letting new people into her orbit: "As things get bigger, you get more scared to open up and be vulnerable and sit down in a room and just speak from the heart," she says.

Part of that might be because Lipa was sorting out a bunch of stuff in her personal life – boundaries, breaks, balance. In December 2021, right as she was entering tour rehearsals, the tabloids reported her breakup with model Anwar Hadid (the brother of Bella and Gigi Hadid), who she dated for two years. She spent the following year tiptoeing back into single life. "Dating, I think overall, is just a little confusing," she says, which is somehow both comforting and terrifying to hear from someone even Margot Robbie has said she has a crush on. "It's either through friends of friends or people you trust where you can meet new people, because [dating] is not really so straightforward when you are, I guess, a public person." (Lipa started a new relationship

PRODUCED BY RHIANNA RULE FOR PALM PRODUCTIONS; PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES; STYLING BY LORENZO POSOCCO; HAIR STYLING BY PETER LUX AT THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP BY NINA PARK FOR KALPANA; TAILORING BY DIANA AGHAJANYAN; PRODUCTION MANAGER: ALEXIS BOOKER; STYLING ASSISTANCE: RAE HAYDEN AND LP STUDIO; HAIR STYLING ASSISTANCE: ALLIE ELLIS; MAKEUP ASSISTANCE: YUKARI BUSH; PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE: JACK CLARKE AND MIKEY DE VERA

"I LIKE TO JUST LIVE MY LIFE, DO MY PHOTO DUMP, WRITE MY SONGS, AND DIP. I'M NOT INTERESTED IN TRYING TO BE CONTROVERSIAL"

last year, but confirms she's single again on a call in December.)

According to Ailin, they "always started with the truth". Lipa would arrive to sessions with Ailin, Harle, Jesso and Parker, armed with stories from the night before, chronicling the often-ridiculous ride that is dating in your mid-twenties.

The final product is uniquely and utterly Dua Lipa: confident dance pop full of witty Instagram-caption-ready one-liners. A lot of the songs are playful scenes from clubs or nights out with friends; the lyrics toggle from warnings that she'll make a fast escape to optimism about what a first kiss could become. There are no sweeping ballads, though there is one good ballad fake-out that blooms into a more buoyant Carole King- and Fleetwood Mac-inspired moment. Mostly, this album is straightforward pop bliss, not unlike her approach to *Future Nostalgia*.

Lipa doesn't talk about her love life in depth. People will have to look to the music to get a sense of her private thoughts: one song juxtaposes light harmonies with a tumultuous portrait of a relationship coming to an end: "*We call it love but hate it here / Did we really mean it when we said forever?*" she sings. But another highlight – one of Lipa's favourites on the record – is all about maturity and healing. The dreamy, midtempo track plays out like an updated take on Gwen Stefani's 'Cool'. In the lyrics, she compliments her ex's new relationship, calling his new girlfriend "really pretty", and she finds peace as he moves on: "*I must have loved you more than I ever knew... I'm not mad / I'm not hurt / You got everything you deserve.*"

"When you have a feeling like that one, you feel really grown because you're like, 'Oh, whoa, I'm such an evolved human being that I can see my ex move on and feel good about it,'" she explains. For Lipa, writing about letting go without animosity was a new experience: "I think I've had breakups in my life where I felt like the only kind of breakup you could have was when things just ended really badly," she says. "Things ending in a nice way was such a new thing... It taught me a lot."

For the sound on the album, she thought back to British club culture and the type of carefree abandon she feels when she's on the dance floor. Lipa's collaborators helped unlock that energy: she met Harle at "the afterparty of an afterparty of a show" through Andrew Wyatt, who co-wrote Lipa's first single, 'New Love', as well as her *Barbie* hit. Wyatt and Harle had done stuff for Polachek, who opened for Lipa's tour. They'd also worked with a less-expected collaborator that piqued Lipa's interest: former Oasis singer Liam Gallagher. On Gallagher's album, Harle was credited as a "rave consultant" responsible for the breakbeat element on the 2022 cut 'I'm Free', which he co-produced with Wyatt.

"Dua really enjoyed that," Harle says. "Dua likes going to a rave." (This is true: "I love being on the dance floor, and being the first on the dance floor if nobody else is dancing," Lipa says.)

Other inspirations came from Lipa's upbringing in London: the mixes that played late in the evening on Radio 1 were a huge guide; that's where she first heard some of her favourite Primal Scream remixes, which eventually led her to their 1991 LP, *Screamadelica*. And in addition to Oasis and Blur, she found herself turning to more of the nineties rock and electronica acts she grew up listening to, like Moby and Gorillaz.

I mention that some of those Brit-pop influences – Noel Gallagher and Damon Albarn in particular – haven't always been very kind to female pop artists (both have taken shots at the likes of Adele and Taylor Swift, for example). I ask her if she's ever met any of them.

"I haven't had any encounters with them, actually," she says. "Sometimes you have to separate the art from the person... It's more like the music element, the aspect of it that I'm really connected to. The way that [some Brit-pop artists] acted, the things that they've done, they're obnoxious for sure. That's their whole thing."

They seem to represent a certain version of toxic rock masculinity, I say, and Lipa agrees, pondering what the world expected from rock stars in the past. "There's so much toxicity in the way people wanted their artists or their musicians," she says. "If they weren't like that, they would've been seen as boring, and I think that's such a bad way to see things."

As raw and loose as the album sounds, Lipa's process was painstakingly detailed. The collaborators call Lipa a "meticulous" editor who rewrote every line until she felt it was perfect. "Her editing is brutal," Parker says. The lead single, 'Houdini', for example, took months to get right. "I'd kind of recoil in horror and go, 'Oh, no, it's a great verse!'" Parker says. "But then an hour later, we'd have something that I can't imagine not being in the song."

"I don't think there's a single song on this record that I didn't go back and want to rewrite and perfect and change and work on it a bit more and dig a little deeper and see if we could go any further," Lipa admits. But her method worked: every single one of the collaborators raves about the chemistry and the cohesiveness Lipa engineered.

"Everyone was going, 'Is this normal? This feels too good to be true,'" Jesso says. "It's the pinnacle of my writing career. There's nothing you could get better than that."

The truth is, you can't be as ambitious and precise as Lipa is without giving a fuck. "I really care about how the fans respond," she says. (After 'Houdini' was released, she was frustrated that people said it still sounded "disco" when none of her influences come from there.)

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't care about what the critics thought... When you put your heart and soul into something, you want people collectively to be like, 'Oh, it's changed sonically, and it's been something different.'"

She's noticed a pattern with all of her singles so far, how they don't start at the top and "gradually grow" over time. "They take so long and never get to number one, but they stay around for a long time," she says. There's no irritation or anger in her voice when she says this; while a number one in the US would be nice, the longevity feels like a hard-earned win.

"As long as the songs stick around and people are listening to them, I'm cool with that," she says.

When it's time to leave, London is a darker shade of grey. Lipa walks me to the door, holding open my jacket for me to stick my arms into. She tells me about her dinner plans at BRAT, a Michelin-star restaurant in Shoreditch where she's meeting up with a primary-school friend. After she recommends the negroni at the restaurant where I'm heading to meet friends, the gates close behind me. Like she promised, the negroni is delicious.

LIPA CAN TRACE HER meticulous nature back to when she was a child. As a kid, she ran a blog called Dua Daily, a Service95 prototype where she would share her style tips and recipes. And as the oldest of three, she's taken her job as a big sister as seriously as she has taken her gigs as both tastemaker and pop superstar. Her siblings were in school when Lipa's career started taking

COAT BY FEAR OF GOD

"FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE, I THROW MYSELF INTO SOMETHING SO HEAVILY TO GET IT RIGHT AND TO MAKE IT PERFECT"

off, and are now forging their own paths; her sister wants to be an actress, while her brother is producing music.

"It's cool to just see them have their goals," she says, grinning proudly. "I'd be like, 'Oh, you guys want to come over?' And they're like, 'Oh, no, I'm busy. I've got a studio session.'" Lipa sees their parents, Anesa and Dukagjin, as her blueprint: Anesa had been studying to be a lawyer and Dukagjin was both a musician and a dentist in Kosovo before they fled their homes in the early nineties when the Bosnian war broke out. The couple completely started over in the UK, where their three kids were born.

"My parents are really the people I look back on for everything," she says. "While I was a kid, they never made me feel like anything was ever wrong. They know they tried to give me as normal of a childhood as they could, while at the same time just working so hard, and working in bars, and restaurants, and pubs, and all that."

When Lipa was 11, her family moved back to Kosovo's capital city, Pristina, after the war. It felt like heaven to Lipa, who got to stay out a little bit later and move more independently in the city's streets, which, she says, were much safer than London's.

School was harder, though. "It was so much more advanced than in London," she says, her eyes widening from the memory. Science, chemistry and maths were particularly tough. "The kids were learning shit that I thought I had time to learn. I was doing fractions in London, and algebra in Kosovo."

Luckily, Lipa seems to like a challenge. She would make bets with her mum, like one where she could get her belly button pierced if she got an A in maths. She got a tutor and, eventually, her piercing.

"Maybe I thrive on being undermined, or maybe I thrive on people saying that I can't do things," she says. "For better or for worse, I throw myself into something so heavily to get it right and to make it perfect, make it good."

Earlier in her career, her low-key demeanour was interpreted as a lack of personality onstage. The "Go girl, give us nothing" meme took off around 2018 after it was left as a comment on a video of Lipa looking either bored or tired while doing a lacklustre hip-swivelling dance move. It's something Lipa brings up during our interview, once without being prompted and another time after being pressed about how much it seems to have stuck with her.

"I did find that really hurtful, and I found it really painful because I was like, 'I'm finally getting to do something that I love to do, and I'm being shut down, that I just can't seem to do anything right,'" she says. "Not only that, but I was also being thrown around the world. Lots of promos, lots of rehearsing, lots of everything, and not having really time to perfect anything."

Lipa began rolling out 'Houdini' on Instagram by playing with the illusionist theme of the song's namesake, posting then deleting teaser photos until announcing the track's release date. She also wiped away her past few years of *Future Nostalgia* and trips around the globe on the app. But, perhaps unwittingly, the theme played into ideas of Lipa as a slippery, hard-to-pin-down pop star: a viral thread on X posted a week after 'Houdini' was released described her as a "mystery" with indiscernible personality traits. "She's everywhere and nowhere," read a follow-up post.

Lipa gets frustrated with the connotation, especially since it's trailed her for a while now. "I think I'm British," she offers. "I don't think I'm here to spill my guts on a talk show because it's going to be good for a news cycle or getting attention... As much as people think they know the people they support, I actually don't think they know anything about them anyway."

Most of the time, Lipa makes her business moves in silence. That's why her fans were shocked when she quietly parted ways with her TaP management team in 2022. A friend of hers helped set up Lipa with TaP CEO Ben Mawson in 2013, when she was just a teenager waiting tables in London. After news broke that Lipa was leaving TaP, she signed on her father as her manager, flipping the way most management shake-ups usually go in pop music.

"To be really quite honest, I can't talk so much about the whole thing," Lipa says, mentioning the litigious nature of the situation. (She says there was a settlement that allowed her to buy back the publishing rights to her music; a TaP spokesperson confirms that Lipa bought her publishing in 2023, a year after their management relationship ended.) Still, the experience reaffirmed how important it is for her to be as well versed on the business side as she is with the creative elements of her career. "The creative side is the way that I express myself, but I think being able to also understand that this is my name, this is what I stand for, these are the things that are important to me, and how that actually goes hand in hand with the artistry nowadays."

She offers a warning to younger artists: "Pay attention early on, especially in the business side of things... I don't think enough people tell young artists that. Everything feels so exciting in the beginning, and of course it is, but it's good to have the knowledge, and good to take care of yourself."

Lipa brings up "knowledge" often. She understands the way the general public looks at her and other female pop stars, refusing to believe that they are more than their looks or their hits.

"I don't know if people believe that I like to read books, or people believe that these conversations are my own," she says. She seems a little resigned – frustrated, even – at how limiting that perception can feel. "I think it's a thing of what people want from their pop stars," she says. "They don't want you to be political. They don't want you to be smart. Not that I'm trying to prove myself in that way, but there is so much more to me than just what I do."

Lipa points back to the experiences of her parents and how it has shaped her worldview. "My existence is kind of political, the fact that I lived in London because my parents left from the war." She doesn't break eye contact as she says this, serious in her tone. "I feel for people who have to leave their home. From my experience of being in Kosovo and understanding what war does, no one really wants to leave their home. They do it for protection, to save their family, to look after the people around them, that kind of thing, for a better life. So I feel close to it."

Lipa has found it hard to stay silent on many issues, especially those that feel similar to what her parents experienced during the war. That's why she has long been an outspoken advocate for the Palestinian people. But in 2021, *The New York Times* ran a full-page ad from Rabbi Shmuley Boteach and the World Values Network accusing Lipa and the Hadid sisters of antisemitism for their support of Palestinian liberation. Lipa took to social media to condemn the organisation's accusations – as well as the paper for running the ad. A year later, she invited former *Times* editor Dean Baquet on her podcast and asked him directly how the paper could publish something "so damaging and potentially dangerous".

LONG-SLEEVE TOP BY MOWALOLA, UNDERWEAR BY MIU MIU, SHOES BY MAISON MARGIELA, TIGHTS BY WOLFORD

"THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO BE POLITICAL. THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO BE SMART... THERE IS SO MUCH MORE TO ME THAN JUST WHAT I DO"

"Speaking to an editor was important for me because I felt like I was put in danger and I was put in a place where my core values were completely flipped on its head, and that really hurt because I feel like when I do want to speak about something, I hope that people will see it for what it is and that there is no malicious intent," she says now.

More recently, she's signed and supported a petition for a cease-fire to the Israel-Hamas war that has torn Gaza to shreds and displaced millions.

"My feelings on displaced people [are] very real and raw, and it is a difficult subject to speak about because it's so divisive," she says. There's a sombre shift as she carefully gathers her thoughts. "But there is a world where you can feel for all lives that are being lost. And I have to say this: I don't condone what Hamas is doing, regardless of what [that advertisement in] *The New York Times* said [in 2021]. Every life is precious."

As she continues, she points out how important it is for people to properly educate themselves on the crisis, especially in the face of rampant misinformation.

"I feel so bad for every Israeli life lost and what happened on October 7," she says. "At the moment, what we have to look at is how many lives have been lost in Gaza, and the innocent civilians, and the lives that are just being lost. There are just not enough world leaders that are taking a stand and speaking up about the humanitarian crisis that's happening, the humanitarian cease-fire that has to happen."

Like many, Lipa feels powerless in the face of the ongoing conflict. Her solution remains being as informed as possible while using her platform to encourage her fans to do the same.

"It's probably easier to be apolitical," she says. "I think there's no kind of deep discussion about war and oppression. It just is something that we've seen happen time and time again. I feel like just being a musician and posting about something doesn't make enough of a difference, but hopefully, just showing solidarity, which is sometimes all you feel like you can do, is important."

'DO YOU SMOKE?" Lipa asks, standing on the private balcony of her suite at the Chateau Marmont. She brings over two Parliaments, lamenting that the hotel doesn't have her usual Marlboro Lights; in the new year, Lipa will announce that she's quitting smoking altogether. She sits down carefully in the structured, leather Jacquemus dress she has on for the night. (It's a lot easier to manoeuvre in than the dress she wears to the Golden Globes in January; she posted a video of herself struggling to sit in her tightly corseted custom Schiaparelli gown after the show.) She strikes a match and lights both cigarettes while staring out at the sea of billboards on Sunset Boulevard.

Lipa likes coming to Chateau when she's out in Los Angeles, with its spooky vibe and the chance of running into people she knows downstairs at the exclusive, celebrity-filled restaurant.

"If these walls could talk, I wonder what the fuck they would say," she says before taking a drag of her cigarette. Above the quiet hum of the traffic below, she talks about the ghost stories she's heard about this place. "I wouldn't go into Bungalow Three," she says, referring to where John Belushi died. Her paranormal curiosity is reserved for the secret tunnels that she's heard about beneath Harry Houdini's estate in Laurel Canyon. We'll be heading there soon for the second of three 'Houdini' fan events she's hosting.

Back inside her suite, her glam team is going through racks of designer clothes, organising what they can. In two days, Lipa will jet off to Tokyo for another fan event, then return to Los Angeles for *Barbie* promos ahead of award season. In between, she'll go back to London, then to New York a couple of times, and even fit in a girls' trip to Copenhagen. She'll end the year in India with her family, a quick break before she begins volleying herself across the world again for more of the same.

Though her career as a singer is the priority, she wonders if there's a future where her path changes, comparing pop stardom to "a hamster wheel".

"You make the album, you promote it, you go on tour, you do the same thing, and that's so amazing, but I think there's going to come a point where maybe I want to take just a little bit longer [in between]," she confesses. "I have all these other things that I can also do that really interest me."

Lipa established her own production, publishing, and management company, Radical22, with which she's making her passion projects come to life. This includes a documentary on her beloved London neighbourhood of Camden that she's executive-producing with Disney+. She's been enjoying the process of booking interviews with artists like Little Simz, who will appear in the doc.

Following her cameo as Mermaid Barbie in *Barbie*, she will play a suave spy in Matthew Vaughn's comedy *Argylle*, which comes out this year. "It was a lot of fun, but a massive learning curve," she admits. "I remember when Matthew reached out for me to do a part in this, I [thought] I should go and do some acting lessons."

Vaughn persuaded her not to, hoping she'd just be herself on camera. "If she was nervous, she hid it well," Vaughn says. He sought out the star after seeing her don a sparkly fringe Valentino dress on *The Graham Norton Show*. ("It sort of looked like a Christmas decoration with legs and arms," he says. "She looked amazing.")

There's other stuff Lipa wants to accomplish: she could see herself moving outside of the UK one day, maybe to Barcelona, or Madrid, or Paris, or Mexico City. She's been learning Spanish and French; by 35, she wants to be more fluent in both, as well as Italian. "I want to know all of them," she says. "I get so jealous when people are speaking in French, or Spanish, or Italian, and I'm like, 'Fuck.' I just want to respond. I think I can pick them up fairly easily because of Albanian, although it's quite different."

She's started to pick up guitar, recently learning 'Knockin' on Heaven's Door'. Maybe in a few years, she'll take some college courses, too. "I started working so young that I just feel like there's going to be a little moment where I do some more sharpening of my knives," she says.

Before long, it's time for her to head to the Houdini Estate, where fans are taking advantage of the open bar, free tacos and dance floor. Lipa makes a grand entrance, descending a spiral staircase and joining the DJ behind the booth. She dances and sings along to two spins of 'Houdini', grabbing people's phones to take a few selfies and videos.

She comes and goes as quickly as promised. She jumps into one of three Escalades transporting her crew around the city. Once she's in the car, she climbs out of the window to give me a hug goodbye. Then she's off, heading back toward the Chateau and its ghosts – and wherever else the night takes her. ®

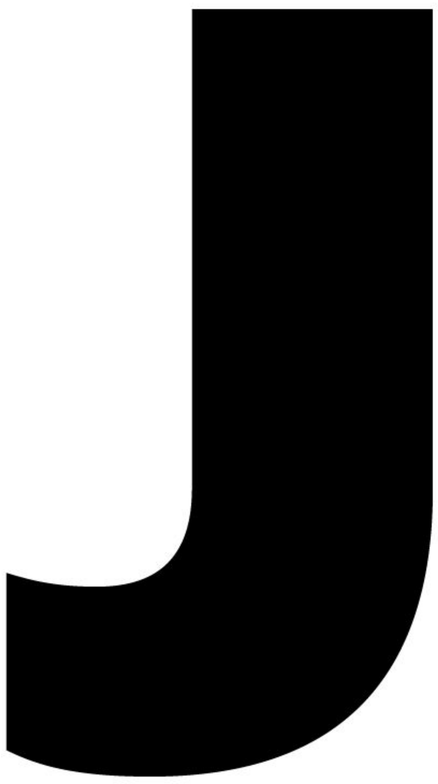
SHEER TOP: VINTAGE HELMUT LANG AT MORPHINE.ONLINE, BRA AND BELT: CELINE BY HEDI SLIMANE, JEANS BY CALVIN KLEIN

IDLES (FROM LEFT) ADAM DEVONSHIRE, MARK BOWEN, JOE TALBOT, JON BEAVIS AND LEE KIERNAN

IT MUST BE LOVE

On their fifth album, *TANGK*, rock band IDLES lean further into experimentation and softer textures while focusing on a central theme: love. At his home in Bristol, frontman Joe Talbot explains how making an album of love songs helped him to heal, while the band's guitarist and producer Mark Bowen explains the key to their writing partnership

BY WILL RICHARDS PHOTOGRAPHY BY LILLIE EIGER



JOE TALBOT LEANS across the table as he cradles a cup of coffee in his Bristol home. "I have two things in my life: my child and this album," he says. The album in question is *TANGK*, IDLES' fifth and most musically adventurous record yet. After he speaks to me vivaciously about its themes of love and his continued recovery from addiction, he heads off to pick his child up from school. "This is the best job in the world," he smiles of the dual passions that currently rule the 39-year-old's life.

Forming in Bristol in 2009, IDLES started out making soft indie-pop songs in the vein of The Maccabees. The next near-decade saw line-up changes and hundreds of small gigs which led to them toughening up their sound and releasing lauded debut album *Brutalism* in 2017. Its raucous, crunchy sound and Talbot's unashamedly vulnerable and political lyrics ("*The best way to scare a Tory is to read and get rich*," he boomed on 'Mother') struck a chord with both young listeners and disenfranchised old punks. After toiling away for eight years, they became the most important guitar band in the country almost overnight.

Second album *Joy as an Act of Resistance* followed in 2018, and soon they were headlining Alexandra Palace and being held up as the latest in a long line of saviours of British guitar music – whether it needed saving or not. They doubled down on the formula on 2020 album *Ultra Mono*, before taking a reflective step back on the following year's *CRAWLER*, an album more concerned with lyrical and sonic experimentation than the battering ram of drums and guitars that they'd made their name with. Throughout it all, Talbot has been unwaveringly open in his interviews and lyrics about his struggles with addiction and how the band and its community of fans have supported him and lifted him up during his journey.

"I started to realise around *Ultra Mono* that I was a public figure for the first time, or at least understood it," Talbot reflects of an album that he still admires but can now see the holes in. "Then you start playing to the choir. That was what the album was about – using bravado and this almost crazed sense of what 'big' is to make an album. Whereas now I'm like, 'No, I won't. I will not surrender to insecurity.' I am insecure. I am scared. I *do* want to be loved. But you get way more when you just be yourself."

Pushing through this insecurity to find genuine connection is a key component of *TANGK*, which continues a lot of what *CRAWLER* started. It's an album exclusively of love songs, presented in more subtle and soft ways than the IDLES of old. "I didn't want to present a standard view of what a love song is," Talbot says. Compared to the roaring frontman we see on stage with IDLES, he is softly spoken and mild-mannered in person, presenting his thoughts gently and with care. "I needed love, and I needed to find love. I was very lonely and scared again, and when going through addiction, self-love is very important. You need to stop this cycle. You have a child; you have a career – this goes one of two ways. One is unbelievable and fruitful and beautiful; the other one is hell. What are you gonna do? Even if that seems like a simple choice, addiction makes it crazily hard. On top of that, love is abundant everywhere, but you need reminding of that. It's seeing the wood through the trees. I just needed to take a breath, start working on myself, loving myself, and the rest would come. And it did."

In order to find this love, Talbot had to disconnect. "I realised that, no matter what, people are gonna think things of me that I don't like, but I don't fucking listen to them in my day-to-day life, so why would I search [for it] online? I haven't looked online once today," he says, pushing his phone away from him on the kitchen table for dramatic effect.

I would like that to be my life as well, I suggest to the singer, with both concrete reasons (work commitments) and more flimsy ones (fear of missing out, force of habit) keeping me tethered to my phone.

"Most people would do, that's the weird thing," he responds. "I'm not doing it to be different... My dad never had a TV, ever. I was always like, 'Why hasn't he got a TV?' but I realise now that he could see what it does to people. Why would you want to stare at something for five hours every night?"

As a father, does he envisage a younger generation rejecting the instant gratification of social media and shunning the things that currently rule our lives?

"The internet is so much more overpopulated now that waves of fashion feel so much more huge. You just have to look at NFTs. How fucking insane was that for like, five minutes? 'This is the future, people! Invest in it!' Do you understand what these people are saying? Imaginary real estate? People are putting their life savings into these things and, lo and behold, it crashed.

"There are dangerous parts to AI in terms of cultural currency and nanotechnology, but my kid and their generation are going to laugh like we laughed at the Victorians," he adds. "You don't need a robot in your kitchen to crack an egg, you just crack an egg. I think it's going to calm down, and everyone is going to realise the real effects of what social media is doing to people and rein it in. It's not healthy. Being on some fucking weird social network nine hours a day is not healthy.

"The human race is the most evolved because we have that perspective – we can look around corners and remember it. So, we will progress, and our kids won't be as stupid with it, but for now it's a fucking massive, bizarre, dangerous circus."

Though it's Talbot's personal prerogative to log off and avoid online discourse, that hasn't stopped it coming for his band. In the past, they have been embroiled in back-and-forth beefs with Fat White Family and Sleaford Mods and been accused of working-class cosplay. When I meet the singer in late November, Israel's siege on Gaza and the Palestinian people is continuing, and IDLES have been criticised online and by other bands on stage for their perceived lack of statement and support for Palestine. Despite adding their signature to Jeremy Corbyn's Music for A Ceasefire open letter, many believed that a band who have made their name – and a great deal of their fanbase – through strong political views and left-wing ideals should be amplifying important information at such a critical time.

For Talbot, it's quite simple. "I stand by the same stuff I've always stood for," he says. "You look at any interview, and it's the same thing. We are not activists. I am concerned with the human condition and how that affects each other, and I use music to connect it to the world, not the internet. Nothing is contradictory to what I said 12 years ago on stage and in every interview. Yes, my values lean towards socialism. What I believe and what I have believed since I was 15 years old is that we have sanctions and handshakes from our government and the American government with Israel and other forces that are fucking hideous.

"I adamantly disagree with Rishi Sunak as a private investor profiteering off other people's death, shaking hands with Netanyahu. I think he should be ashamed of himself. Do I think that telling my friends on Instagram is going to help? No, I don't.

"I'm a public figure," he adds. "I could quit and go back to care work. I've signed petitions, gone on marches, donated money. I get the conversation, but people being offended that I'm not posting on Instagram is insane. As our audiences will tell you, I've been going through a lot recently, and the worst place for my mental health is online. I'm recovering, and I'm happy to recover on my own."

It was a similar situation during the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020, when IDLES were criticised for a lack of instant reaction. "There was a lot of virtue-signalling, and we wanted to make sure that anything we contributed was going to be [helpful]," Mark Bowen told *NME* at the time. In the background and away from online discourse, Talbot was designing a special IDLES shirt which ended up raising £36,000 for the charity.

Talbot is an engaging and open conversationalist, considering his answers deeply before presenting them slowly and carefully. During our conversation, he addresses these kinds of criticisms of the band calmly and warmly, admitting that he has been somewhat misunderstood in the past due to his methods of communication. The only moment in our whole time together that he bristles or seems uncomfortable is when he discusses IDLES' public categorisation as a punk band, something he brings up unprompted.

"Being called a punk band was something I wanted to stop, because I didn't want to then have to ride that horse and be forced to play what people thought was punk music," he says with determination. "As a musician, I was listening to hip-hop from the age of 11 to 25. Do I strip that from my past so as to adhere to some lazy person's perspective? I'm more than that as a musician. I'm a punk musician, I'm a rapper, I'm a folk artist, I'm a painter. I'm whatever I want to be today. I'm a creative person, and no one's going to tell me who I am. I'm in a band with five very different human beings in it, and we're not going to be just one thing."

He adds: "I found it quite problematic that people said [to me]: 'You're a white man who hates your government and what they've done to the working classes: you must be a punk.' No, I'm not. I'm just not a Tory, and I've got a microphone, and I sing about what is on my mind. Now I'm not shouting on my albums anymore, I'm never going to suddenly be like, 'Oh, Tony Blair was all right, actually!' I'm very saddened by where our country has got to, but I want to sing about love."

"I FOUND MY VOICE AGAIN — FIGURATIVELY AND LITERALLY. THAT'S THE TRUTH"

— *TALBOT*

If a band's categorisation as 'punk' is as simple as a vocalist roaring their way through songs as opposed to crooning, *TANGK* will surely finish what *CRAWLER* started and paint IDLES in a very different light. Barely ever on the new album does Talbot raise his voice to the booming growl that defined the band's first albums; instead, he takes inspiration from the soul singers he adores, manifesting his softer outlook on life through his vocal delivery. On *TANGK*, these love songs can be personal and giddy ("*I'm a smart man, but I'm dumb for youuuu*," he croons on 'Roy') or rallying cries ("*Lift my people up, that's my tool!*" goes highlight 'POP POP POP'), and both are equally vital to the album's narrative.

The singer agrees when I suggest that this transformation from visceral shouting to the alternative form of expression he has discovered in singing is as simple and apt an allegory for the change from the old to the new Talbot as it seems on the surface. "I've been doing a lot of therapy recently, and I've realised that I've been wearing a defensive mask," he reflects. "I lost a lot of things in my life, and I was very scared. You have to fight through these things, and sometimes that means putting on a couple of shin guards or war paint.

"I was very much in a state of flux with my emotions and addiction, and I wasn't getting out of it. So, I changed the script, and I made a new approach built from poise and love and using art to connect again. That's very much why I started the band – to connect to the universe and to connect to people. It was almost like finding my mojo again..." he adds before sighing: "That'll be the quote now!

"I found my voice again – both figuratively and literally," he affirms, unable to resist expanding on the simple – but accurate – narrative of *TANGK*. "That's the truth. I found my voice again. I can be vulnerable. I can be in love. I can be soft."

“I’M A PUNK MUSICIAN, I’M A RAPPER, I’M A FOLK ARTIST. I’M IN A BAND, AND WE’RE NOT GOING TO BE ONE THING”

— TALBOT

"OUR CREATIVITY IS SO DIFFERENT. I WORK BEST WITH CHAOS, BUT HE NEEDS ORDER"
— *BOWEN*

As with everything in our conversation, it all comes back to his album and his child. "There was definitely a new perspective from being a parent," he says. "You have to be a softer touch, physically. My form of parenting is about empathy and just putting myself in my child's shoes for a minute, and thinking: 'What would you do if you were relying on someone else for food all the time?' You wouldn't get pissed off with them.

"I'm treating things with empathy and realising that I want to open doors artistically with my audience that haven't been opened before, and I can't do that by using the same approach. It has to be something new to let my other sides through. I'm so complex, as everyone is, and I want to explore all of it. Lyrically, content-wise and thematically, all our albums are very different and complex, but that [shouting] voice made things quite two-dimensional at times, so people misunderstood my message. Instead of just expecting everyone else to understand me, I had to change my approach."

TO MAKE *TANGK*, IDLES guitarist and producer Mark Bowen worked once again with rap producer Kenny Beats while also drafting in Radiohead's sixth member Nigel Godrich. The band first met Godrich when they were invited to play his relaunch of the legendary *From the Basement* series. "That was a very nerve-wracking time for us because I'd watched it religiously," Talbot says. "The way he made us sound, it felt like he really understood us musically, and we were quite surprised by that."

After sessions at Godrich's studio in Brixton, the band, Godrich and Beats decamped to the south of France to mould the new album. "What I wanted from this album from the outset was for us to get more advantageous and experimental," Bowen tells me from his home in Belfast when I call him the day after meeting Talbot in Bristol. "Nigel told us about tape loops and showed us a lot about different approaches to writing. IDLES has always been a sonic cacophony, but we wanted to explore that violence in ways that isn't just using feedback and noise. What a good producer does is make the band feel confident in pursuing those things and feel confident in making mistakes. Nigel is just great at that."

While the trio of producers buried their heads in their equipment, Talbot had only written one full song of lyrics for the album – the soft and beautiful 'Grace' – and left the rest to spill out of him off the cuff when he entered the booth. *TANGK* is an album about instinctive and undeniable love – something that can't be quantified or forensically examined – so he wanted his words to feel the same. When the lyrics came out, "they were perfect," he says with a smile. "They were exactly what I wanted them to be, which is poetic and true. It was just a very vibrant time – everything felt lucid, vivid."

While IDLES emerged as a five-piece band with what seemed to be a traditional sound and approach, *CRAWLER* and *TANGK* have shone a light on the special and unusual creative partnership between Talbot and Bowen, two artists who are opposites in many ways. "*CRAWLER* sparked a lot of inspiration for more work between me and Bo, and what we're capable of," says Talbot. "We realised that we're way, way more interested in our relationship as writers than we first thought. Bowen is very pragmatic and the opposite to me," he explains. "He gives me good advice when we're in a good place emotionally, but if we're in a bad place, we just clash and have to leave each other alone. I want him one way quite aggressively, and he wants me another way, or he doesn't want me at all. It's a very push-and-pull affair, so we have to go away, regroup and come back."

Bowen laughs but agrees when presented with his sidekick's feelings. "That is definitely where we really rub and clash; we're the exact opposite person in almost every way," he says. "The ethos of the band and how we present that is something that we are very much aligned on, but as far as our creativity [goes], it's so different. I work best with chaos, but he needs order."

VIEWED IN TERMS of this creative partnership and musical experimentation, everything on *TANGK* comes back to its core tenet: love. "I just realised that writing about anything else would have been pretentious at the time," says Talbot. "I didn't have anything else I wanted to write about. I just wanted to focus on this. I was fixated on love, and I am fixated on love. All the other stuff is bullshit to me right now. I want to be connected to the people that I need to be connected to, and to heal. So why write about something else?"

As well as a personal manifesto, it's one that reaffirms IDLES' status as a band for the people. Though it may not be transmitted via online statements and loud, brash rock songs with political sloganeering for lyrics, here they present an even more potent form of connection, one Talbot believes can be necessary and useful for his audience as well as himself.

"Because of the way my life has happened and the choices I made, I need to heal," he reflects before we part ways for him to head out on the school run. "I need to stay grounded in order to make the right decisions and be safe and be a good father. That's coming out in my music, just as the thing that's at the forefront of my mind always comes out in my music."

As we wrap our conversation, Talbot's hope for the next era of IDLES is that fans will understand and openly receive this new form of expression and the message of *TANGK*. "I hope that this is a new way of helping people heal and make the right decisions politically, by giving people love and talking about love. The more people have love and empathy in their hearts, the more they make the right decision. I'm singing from the same hymn sheet – it's just a different song." ®

FASHION DIRECTION BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN; SET DESIGN BY ISABEL ALSINA REYNOLDS; HAIR & MAKEUP BY SOPHIA COX; FIRST PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: DOM FLEMING; SECOND ASSISTANT: ALEJANDRO MARTINEZ-CAMPOS; DIGITAL OPERATOR: THOMAS SEDGEWICK

TO CAPTURE A FIRE

Actor Kingsley Ben-Adir on playing Jamaica's most famous son, reggae icon Bob Marley — a role he embodies with the full support of the Marley family — in forthcoming biopic, *One Love*

By Nick Reilly

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANNY KASIRYE
CREATIVE DIRECTION BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN
STYLING BY ITUNU OKE

KINGSLEY WEARS BLAZER, TOP AND TROUSERS BY **AMI PARIS**, OVERCOAT BY **FLORENCE BLACK**

KINGSLEY WEARS JACKET, SHIRT AND TIE BY **GANT**, JEANS BY **PAUL SMITH**, WATCH BY **OMEGA**

KINGSLEY BEN-ADIR

WHEN KINGSLEY BEN-ADIR was first approached to play Bob Marley by the late music icon's son Ziggy, no less, the daunting prospect of immortalising the eternal reggae icon meant that he almost turned down the role completely. "It initially felt like a no from me," he recalls. "I really felt like I wasn't right for it. I don't sing, I don't dance, and there was nothing physically similar that meant I could really convince people I was him."

After spending a weekend delving into the singer's life, a "transcendental" experience occurred when the British actor found himself watching Marley's legendary 1977 live shows at London's Rainbow Theatre. This allowed him to forge a greater connection with the man who brought reggae to the world and, ultimately, to deliver an audition that won over Marley's family. "When Bob Marley's family are looking at you and saying they want you to play him, as an artist it feels dangerous to say no," says the 37-year-old.

Ben-Adir is speaking to Rolling Stone UK in a London hotel in December 2023, two months before the film is about to hit cinemas. He's calm and friendly, but the occasional grin that flashes across his face while talking about playing Marley suggests he's only too aware that this is his biggest role to date, a chance to play a musical great and have that portrayal watched by Marley's legions of fans across the globe.

Born in north London, Ben-Adir has become an increasingly ubiquitous face on the big screen in recent years. He first found fame playing a series of small-screen roles on cosy UK crime dramas such as *Vera* and *Midsomer Murders*, but in recent years Hollywood has increasingly come calling. He won plaudits for his turn as Malcolm X in Regina King's *One Night In Miami*, has become part of the MCU with a leading part in *Secret Invasion* on Disney+, and even portrayed Basketball Ken in *Barbie*, the biggest film of last year. But it's in *One Love*, produced by Ziggy alongside his wife Orly, that Ben-Adir will step firmly into the spotlight. His portrayal of the reggae icon has already won the approval of the wider Marley family, including the late singer's wife Rita, and Cedella, one of Marley's daughters.

Part of the Marleys' endorsement, Ben-Adir says, was an early realisation that a copycat portrayal was not the point of the project. "As we went along, we understood that this wasn't and should never be an imitation of Bob or an attempt to mimic him. It was a communal effort to get underneath the man and show a side to him that's more human, to look at some of the struggles and some of the pressures he was under at the time. And I was like, 'Well, I'm an actor and I can do that.'"

Before *One Love* director Reinaldo Marcus Green (*King Richard*) watched Ben-Adir's audition, the search for someone to play the titular music icon had been prolonged, and the project was in danger of falling into development hell. "It was a long search, and I hadn't given up, but I thought it was very possible that we weren't going to find the right actor, and the movie wasn't going to happen. We'd looked through thousands of tapes, and there were some good actors who just weren't right," he reflects.

"But when I saw Kingsley's tape, it was the first time that a light bulb had gone off for me. It felt different. If you've met Kingsley, you'll know he's got an incredible presence, and he's a deeply intelligent and sensitive man. After I watched that tape, my tentacles were going off, and I just thought, 'This guy is special.' So, obviously, I spoke to Ziggy and told him how significant I thought the tape was. Because I wasn't looking for a musician, I didn't care if he could sing or dance or any of that stuff. I just cared if he could act and, man, I saw that in him."

It was crucial that the Marley family felt the same about Ben-Adir. Ziggy Marley admits that it was a surprise to be considering a British actor for the role. "We were looking for somebody from Jamaica or somebody who had the dialect straight away, but when we saw his audition, he immediately kept our attention. As a family we never felt like he was trying to mimic Bob, and there was a magnetism missing before Kingsley came. We needed somebody who had it like Bob had it, and this is how I felt about Kingsley. He just kept our attention the whole time and just did a really great job.

"We've been showing friends, and nobody is questioning his interpretation. There's no question that this man has done the thing that we asked him to do."

Early footage of the film viewed by Rolling Stone UK proves that Ben-Adir is a remarkable fit as Marley. He manages to nail the singer's irrepressible spirit and spring-like sprightliness while performing on stage.

An hour spent in Ben-Adir's company is enough to leave you wondering if the actor's spirit played a large part in his selection, too. His answers are punctuated with deep, thoughtful pauses, allowing him to answer with remarkable clarity and insight. Interview clips of the late Marley show that he possessed the same qualities.

But when Ben-Adir's casting was announced in January 2022, it caused a stir back in Marley's native Jamaica, with some refusing to accept that the country's most famous export would be played by a British actor. "You searched for a year and couldn't come up with a Jamaican?" wrote one critic on social media. "It won't be the same as using a Jamaican or

"I really felt like I wasn't right for it. I don't sing, I don't dance, and there was nothing physically similar that meant I could really convince people I was him"

one of his kids. We need that raw Jamaican patois in order to feel the vibration."

Responding to the criticism today, Ben-Adir says that he's letting his performance do the talking, while explaining that the approval of Marley's family should be the final word on the matter. "Without the support of Bob's family, I wouldn't have gone near it," he says. "It's not my job to explain why I was cast, but in my mind all I know is that Rei [director] and [Marley's] family made their decision, and I felt love, and I felt trust and that allowed me to think, 'Right, I'm going to go fully 100 per cent on this.'

"I mean, I sat with the head of Paramount early on, and I said to him: 'When you say go, I'm going to go, just so you know. When I go, there will be emails, and there will be ideas, and I'm going to be non-stop in my research.' They were suddenly like 'All right, this guy is crazy enough to do it.'"

When Ben-Adir went to Marley's homeland for filming, it left him in no doubt as to the magnitude of his task. "When I went to Jamaica, I saw pictures of Bob on every road. There were statues of him everywhere, and the significance of this man to that culture is just unlike anything you've ever seen," he thoughtfully explains. "So that meant there was a huge feeling of respect and pressure, and I knew I couldn't do it unless we represented the language and culture to the fullest."

True to his word, Ben-Adir set about immersing himself in the role, even down to perfecting the language of Jamaica. "Patois is not a dialect," he says. "It's a different language entirely, and it was about making sure that everyone understood that. This is a foreign language film with no subtitles, so this challenge proved massively important. We needed to stay true to Bob and the culture because that language is the emotional through-line of the story for a universal audience."

To learn Patois, Ben-Adir recalls trawling through a treasure trove of rare archival interviews he was given by Marley's daughter Cedella. He would painstakingly transcribe each one, before seeking dialect advice from local Jamaicans while filming in the singer's native country, as well as from

ONE VOICE Ben-Adir's vocals have been blended with Marley's

"When I went to Jamaica, I saw pictures of Bob on every road. The significance of that man to that culture is just unlike anything you've ever seen"

the local musicians who play The Wailers in the film. "I'd been prepping on my own for seven or eight months, but suddenly the descendants of The Wailers were playing! Suddenly, there was this community, and they were so supportive of me and there to help. There were always people to bounce off. Neville Garrick, Bob's best mate who died recently, he'd be there, and he'd just say 'Nah, Bob would do this like that!' I was grateful there was a real understanding that I wasn't just trying to do an impersonation. There were flashes of Bob's spirit, but it's Bob through me. This is my interpretation of who he was."

There was also the challenge of playing guitar. Ben-Adir taught himself, spending hours trawling through basic tutorials on YouTube, and reached a proficient standard. He learnt to sing, too, with the film's final cut blending his own vocals with those of Marley's. And in a bizarre meeting of two worlds, these preparations began when he found himself on-set in the pink plastic-fantastic world that defined Greta Gerwig's box-office smash, *Barbie*, in which he plays one of many incarnations of Ken. "The funny thing is that I found playing Bob to be an emotionally intense experience, but *Barbie* was no less so the case," he surprisingly admits. "My character goes into the big battle in that film, and he feels like he's going to lose his best friend, Big Ken, and maybe even his life."

While undeniably starker in *One Love*, mortality is a theme shared by both films. *One Love* begins with the assassination attempt that almost claimed Marley's life in December 1976, before charting the years he spent in London making the seminal *Exodus* album. Later, it traces his historic performance at the One Love Peace Concert in Kingston, Jamaica, in April 1978, which sought to bring unity at a time of mass political unrest.

Marcus Green says that *City Of God*, the noughties crime epic which tackled gang life in Rio De Janeiro, proved to be an unlikely inspiration. "I was leaning towards the idea

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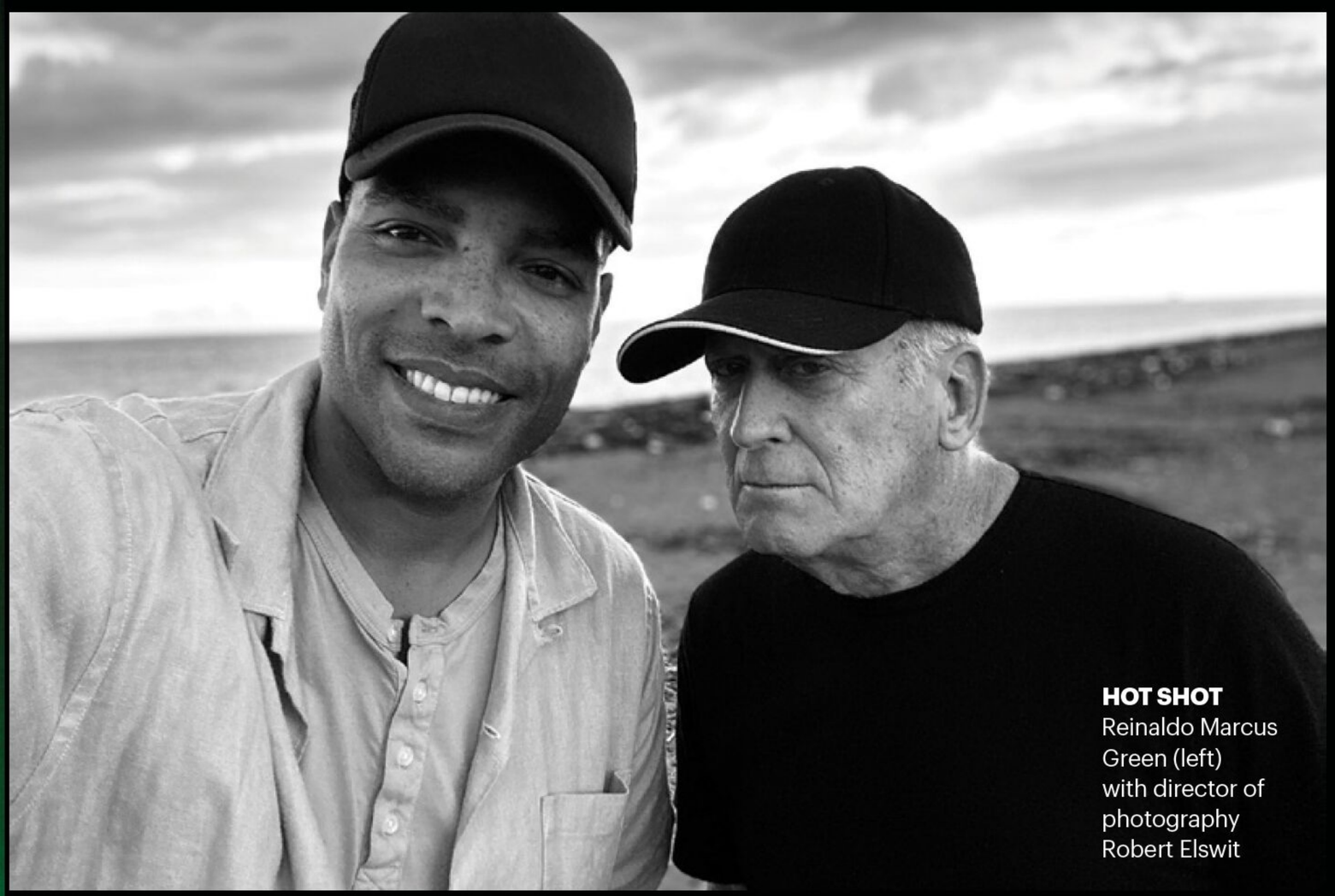
KINGLSEY WEARS TOP BY **WALES BONNER AT SELFRIDGES**, TROUSERS BY **AMIRI**, WATCH BY **TAG HEUER**

KINGSLEY WEARS JACKET, SHIRT AND TIE BY **GANT**, JEANS BY **PAUL SMITH**, TRAINERS BY **REEBOK AT SCHUH**, WATCH BY **OMEGA**



HOT SHOT
Reinaldo Marcus Green (left) with director of photography Robert Elswit

of making our own *City of God*," he says. "We wanted to make a raw, gritty film that has music in it. That film was a real touchstone because it offers so much in understanding the politics of Brazil without going into it. We wanted to do that for Jamaica. We're making a film big on scale, but we wanted to make it feel intimate."

This intimacy extends to the portrayal of Bob Marley, the man, too, Ben-Adir insists. The film focuses on the creation of *Exodus*, but it also looks at Marley's personal flaws, too. "I had lots of private conversations with Bob Marley's family that will stay between us, but they helped me to understand the struggles he went through on a personal level as a child, and it breaks your heart for any child to go through what he did," says Ben-Adir. "Bob had undiagnosed complex PTSD. It's not to say there wasn't love in his family, but the streets were rough back then, and Jamaica was a tough place. It was a tough place to be small and light-skinned. Bob was mixed race, and I knew that before because I am mixed race too, but not everyone does know that.

"Bob became a tough guy as a result of that adversity. There's this westernised image of him, the university campus image of him. But Bob was a boss. He was a tough, tough guy. The Wailers called him Skip, they called him the general, and he was a disciplinarian in the studio, and he could look after himself."

The cameras began rolling in London in late 2022, before heading to Jamaica in the early portion of last year to capture some of the film's most integral scenes. They included that pivotal moment at the 1978 One Love Peace concert when Marley famously got Michael Manley (the then leader of the ruling People's National Party) and his political rival Edward Seaga (leader of the opposing Jamaica Labour Party) to join each other on stage and shake hands.

Over a Christmas break in filming, Ben-Adir took to finessing Bob's on-stage movements and found a through-line in the unlikeliest of places. "I was trying to understand Bob's dancing because you can't choreograph him; he was so kind of wild and free and instinctive. But when I used technology to isolate instruments, you could realise that Bob was following the conducting of the drum." To illustrate the point further, Ben-Adir suddenly rises from his chair and begins moving like Marley – almost like giving Rolling Stone UK our own private performance. "The reason he dances differently in every song is because the drums are different in every song. I would just rehearse playing the drum beat and the lyrics, and it started to make sense. He's completely telling the drummer what to do through his movements, and I thought that was quite astonishing. He was leading the band through his movements."

Further inspiration struck when he watched *Stop Making Sense*, Jonathan Demme's legendary film that captures the art-rock band Talking Heads in concert over four nights at Hollywood's Pantages Theatre. "I put it on and was struck by David Byrne doing a similar thing. I couldn't work out what it was, but then I looked at the drums, and it was just so similar. I thought, 'Yes, that's it.'" In rehearsals, he recalls getting drummer Hector Roots Lewis – who plays The Wailers' Carlton Carly Barrett – to play the funk music of James Brown to get the actors warmed up. "It was just so much fun. I found the dancing and the guitar and the singing so much fun once you get over the embarrassment of looking like an idiot."

Looking like an idiot? "Well, you have to make mistakes in order to get to the goal," he expands. "The best actors are brave and courageous, and they're not scared of making a fool of themselves, and I've definitely got better at that. As I've got older, I couldn't give a fuck. I'm now honestly at the point where I'll just say 'What do you need me to do? Let's do it because I know it's all in service of trying to find the story.'"

That sense of empowerment comes from his time playing another 20th-century icon. "It's all Regina King who let me play Malcolm X, that's who I owe it to. She trusted in me and believed me when everyone else was telling her the opposite. She gave me full

"Marley's family helped me to understand the struggles he went through as a child, and it breaks your heart for any child to go through what he did"

PARAMOUNT PICTURES

creative freedom. She didn't know what she was doing for me at the time, but she gave me an opportunity I'd been hoping and dreaming of since I was 16. She let me fly," he says of his Hollywood break-out.

When asked who his detractors were when he was tackling the role of Malcolm X, Ben-Adir suddenly sits forward in his chair, deep in thought and pauses for a moment. "There was a lot of pressure to cast someone who was African American, but the African-American actor, who was very high profile, dropped out of the movie two weeks before. And if you do write about this, the full context is very important," he clarifies.

"The part was turned down again by three or four people, and it was an emergency situation. She was starting filming in three or four weeks, and she needed the actor to come and play Malcolm, who was able to elevate that text. I was available, and what's important is her trust in me on-set to try things out and wanting to show Malcolm in a different way – his gentle spirit. Regina and I just really aligned in that way."

From the hour spent in Ben-Adir's company, it's clear that he is a man with a point to prove with his biggest role yet. His commitment to nailing the smallest aspects of Marley's personality shows an admirable commitment to his craft. One thing he stopped short of, however, is the extreme method acting that some actors have recently resorted to for biopics. Most notably, Austin Butler admitted that he didn't see his family for three years while filming *Elvis* and even spoke in the King's distinctive Memphis drawl for the whole shoot. "Just to be clear, everyone's got their own way they work, and I can be around any actor as long as they bring their A-game, and Austin definitely brought his to that film," he says thoughtfully, evidently keen to avoid any misinterpretation or to be drawn into a headline-driven war of words.

"He did what he needed in order to create that incredible performance, but I tend to stay in more of a deep concentration for the whole project. I'd say five minutes before we start rolling, I'll need to concentrate and go from there. I've always thought you need to be prepared for the reality that it's 7am, and they could be shooting your biggest scene. Football is a good comparison because those guys need to be ready from the minute that the ref blows the whistle, and I kind of look at it like that."

BY YOUR SIDE
Lashana Lynch stars as wife Rita

"Kingsley's commitment to Bob and my culture makes me emotional. Him embodying Bob was like nothing I'd ever seen"
— Lynch

Alongside Ben-Adir as Marley, the film boasts an impressive roll call of British talent. *Happy Valley* lead James Norton appears as Island Records founder Chris Blackwell, while Lashana Lynch – best known for her turn as MI6 agent Nomi in Bond film *No Time to Die* – appears as Marley's wife Rita. On screen, Ben-Adir and Lynch's intense chemistry replicates that of Bob and Rita, who famously stood by each other despite a string of extra-marital affairs on both sides. "The work that Lashana has done on this film speaks for itself," says Ben-Adir. "It's incredible, and whenever Lashana was on set, it was always a better day. She just brings an intelligence and a sense of grounded sensitivity to everything she does, and she was always looking out for me."

Lynch, who is of Jamaican descent, similarly explains how Ben-Adir was at huge pains to offer a true and rounded portrayal of Marley. "He doesn't know this, but thinking on Kingsley's commitment to Bob and my culture actually makes me emotional," she says. "I hadn't worked with an actor who lives, eats, breathes and takes such delicate care when protecting the human they are portraying. In many moments, I became Rita off the back of my want for protecting Kingsley on set. He gives an unbelievable amount to his craft, so part of my job was to ensure this man was protected at all costs. Seeing him draw sweat from embodying Bob energetically was like nothing I'd ever seen. In return, I'll applaud him forever."

For Ben-Adir, unsurprisingly, it has forever changed his relationship with a true musical great. "It's funny because I can't even remember now what my relationship with Bob and his music was like before going into this film. To spend a year and a half just thinking about him and living in that space, I loved it. I've really loved it." ®

PARAMOUNT PICTURES. GROOMING BY LIZ TAW AT THE WALL GROUP USING OMOROVICZA; FASHION ASSISTANT: SCOTT CRUFT

KINGSLEY WEARS BLAZER, TOP AND TROUSERS BY **AMI PARIS**, OVERCOAT BY **FLORENCE BLACK**

BETWEEN DREAMS AND REALITY

BY **NICK REILLY**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **AARON PARSONS**

Yard Act are back with a new sound for their second album, *Where's My Utopia?* Here, they discuss the record's more personal focus, and how the fantasy of making it big measures up to living through it

GROUNDWORK
Yard Act (from left): Ryan Needham, Sam Shipstone, James Smith and Jay Russell

DIGGING DEEP
Introspection informs the themes of *Where's My Utopia?*

SINCE RELEASING THEIR DEBUT ALBUM *The Overload* in January 2022, Yard Act have secured a list of achievements that any misty-eyed band striving for greatness in their rehearsal rooms would die for. A reworking of a track with famous fan Elton John? Tick! A five-night sold-out homecoming in their native Leeds? Tick! Being, er, upstaged by a rhino? Again, it's a tick.

To add a bit of context on the last point, in November, frontman James Smith found himself standing on a stage in Meanwood, Leeds, joined by the mascot of rugby side Leeds Rhinos, to turn on the Christmas lights in front of a crowd of bemused locals – which feels like a roundabout way of saying that Yard Act are something of a big deal round those parts.

It's all testament to how *The Overload* became an album that pricked up the ears of not just Yorkshire, but the world, cementing Yard Act's status as one of the most promising bands around. As Rolling Stone UK's five-star review of the record explained, the band were the latest in a strong line-up of British and Irish bands to spearhead a post-punk revival – but what separated Yard Act from the pack was their ability to indulge in the strange and surreal. Through Smith's lyrics, we were presented with characters like the unscrupulous landlord Graham, who helped paint an image of a Britain where altruism and compassion were in seemingly short supply.

But on Yard Act's second album, *Where's My Utopia*, band leader Smith turns the gaze on himself to offer a powerfully honest reflection on life at the top and the moments when long-strived-for success isn't all it's cracked up to be.

On album track 'Petroleum', which zips along with a hip-hop groove, Smith reflects on the real-life moment when burn-out from an intense tour schedule led him to dramatically turn on the crowd at a show in Bognor Regis, berating them for what he perceived as a lack of reaction.

"It was the first show back this year, and we'd had such an intense year, and it really felt like we'd put in the hard work. But we got there for our first gig of the year, and nothing had changed," he recalls.

"There were small things like there being no non-alcoholic beer at a time when I'd been trying to give up drinking. There was only junk food, and I just felt depressed because it felt like we were about to do the same year that I've vowed never to do again because it was too much for me. I thought two weeks back would clear my burn-out, but it just hit me hard again. Then we went on stage, and the sound was shit, the lights were in my face, and it was just one of those gigs where everything was going wrong. It just went south, and I told the crowd I was bored on stage, which didn't go down too well."

After a backstage bust-up with bassist Ryan Needham, Smith was quickly able to re-evaluate "what was at stake" for the group's future.

"Since then, I've never put anything less than my soul into every night. That was the amazing thing about that night, and I'm so glad that Ryan called me out because since then, it's been sacred to me. I owe it to everyone who's come in that room, plugged in the cables and pushed the faders up. The people who work the doors and the people that put our posters up. That's a magic moment, and you can't take it for granted. I've managed to see the importance of it in a way that I lost track of before because of how intense the year before was."

But at the same time, Smith sees it as reflective of a wider problem.

"I think there's some validity in saying that the commercialism of music has diminished the honesty and the art form, and it's created something where people now have a list of demands they expect because they pay £20 or something to go and watch you."

Now, it seems like the band are in a far better place. *Where's My Utopia* is released in March and sees the band taking a step up. With Gorillaz producer Remi Kabaka Jr onboard, here's an album that bounds along with a floor-filling, funk-led groove, while also maintaining the honesty and insight that made the world prick up their ears and listen to Yard Act.

James, the last time we spoke, you were saying that this album sees Yard Act moving away from post-punk. It's delivered on that front — it's got much more of a groove than the first one.

Yeah, and it feels like a jumping-off point for future explorations as well. I think the most important thing about it is that it was really crafted as an album, and it flows as one continuous piece. The first one obviously has a narrative, but the sequencing here really helps the story to unfold.

"I've had to learn how to be two people. One is the public face, and another is the private"

— SMITH

Did Remy Kabaka Jr help with that? He's produced Gorillaz before, so is very much in that world of dancefloor fillers.

RYAN NEEDHAM: My lasting memory of him is how he helped 'The Trench Coat Museum', our comeback track. He really transformed the second half of that song, and his impact wasn't always as marked on some of the songs, but he really helped us find something there.

SMITH: He gave us the confidence to trust ourselves. Our confidence exploded and that came from an ability to bring this sheer, unfiltered love of music, the way he talks about music and his love for it. He's inspiring to be around, and there were no boundaries with the way he works. He just lets you lean into it, and his references feel like a vast encyclopaedia.

SAM SHIPSTONE: I feel like he's the Terminator and he's been sent back in time, the amount that man knows!

SMITH: That's not stopped either. I speak to him several times a week, and it's just pictures of records or download that we send to each other. And it's just all dead good stuff!

But at the same time, this feels like quite an introverted and personal record, James. If the first album was defined by characters like Graham the Landlord, it feels like you're the main character on this one.

SMITH: I suppose that's an obvious trick to just go [in] the opposite direction, but I have thought about this, and I think what it boils down to is I feel less comfortable talking about that stuff. I think my outlook has changed, and I'm a lot less cynical, and that judgement of other people is something I'm actively trying to do less. I do feel fine with everything I said and holding people to account, but I don't think I'd write a song like that again, and it's fine. I just feel less confident that people are wrong and I'm right.

It's quite confessional and biographical at points. On 'Down by the Stream', you're looking back on your childhood and seeking forgiveness from a lad you picked on many years ago.

SMITH: I also think there's some embellishment in there. There's truth in everything, and I think that ambiguity has been lost in recent years, probably because of the internet and how everyone has become microscopic, and we're able to take a look into artist's lives. David Bowie was always brilliant at holding something back, and I do think in terms of what's totally true and what's fiction on the album, I'm gonna let the listeners decide.

But I did think it was important that if I was gonna write from the heart and represent myself as a very sort of sorry-looking man who was struggling in a band and missing his child, I wanted to flesh out that character and show there's grey areas in everyone and people are complex characters.

Does that ambiguity come from wanting to hold something back maybe?

I mean you do have to live your public life alongside your private life in this job and that to an extent is a part of it. Since this took off, I've had to learn how to be two people. One is the outgoing, public face of it, and another is the private, and it's funny how the private side is getting smaller and smaller.

Are there any specific instances where that's proved hard?

NEEDHAM: There was the festival...

SMITH: Oh yeah, I was literally changing my son's nappy at a festival, and a bloke came up to me and asked for a photo. I was happy to do that, but it was a bit like, er, give me a second. I did do the photo. That's weird, innit? I think now maybe I wouldn't, but I just think there's never the right time to, like, dress somebody down.

There's honesty too in 'Petroleum', where you're talking about the bust-up that followed after James berated the audience at Butlins. How have you managed to change touring to avoid that again?

SMITH: Well, this industry is notorious for temptation, but I've stopped drinking and that's really helped.

NEEDHAM: I feel like there's a lot more discourse and openness about not drinking. It's got rapidly better, and people are talking about it and making changes.

SMITH: But I definitely couldn't have done it without non-alcoholic Guinness. But I even had eight of those a night to start when I stopped drinking, which shows how much of a connection with it I had when performing. Now I've just gone for fizzy water, I'm full monk! I'm straight edge, and I don't drink those either.

Look, a bit more money came through after that show and that really helped with another level of comfort – getting out of the van and onto a bus! Having the money to tour properly, it's a gamechanger and not many bands get to do that.

This album grapples with you as a father, too, James. What is it like being in a touring band when he's at home?

I still have this internalised guilt that I'm working through processing. I'm not content just being a father and sometimes I wish I was. There is this other part of me that's obsessed with creating music and being successful, whatever success counts for. I still wonder why this is so important to me. But it does pay the bills, so that helps me justify it when I'm away. But I also know that when I'm home I'm home, and when he grows up, he gets to see what I've done. I also know that we're solid and that he loves me when I go away and that my wife loves me too. It's also not the only job where people go away!

> **"The problems are so deep that we can't say 'This is wrong, and this is what I want to happen now!'"**
>
> **—NEEDHAM**

But it does, as an album, feel like something of a love letter to him too. Especially on 'Blackpool Illuminations', where you're looking at your own childhood.

Course it is. He's the most important thing in my life, and I'm doing a lot of it for him. I'm doing it for myself, of course, but this is an investment in his future as well.

That title of *Where's My Utopia?*, what does that mean for you?

NEEDHAM: When I hear it, from my perspective, it reflects this world we're living in where people want the world to be the way they want, and they want [it] to happen now. It's a genuine stress and strain that everyone is going through because they want it now. It's this instant gratification, and the problems are so deep that we can't say "This is wrong, and this is what I want to happen now!" But I feel like the internet has made everyone think they can have what they want overnight. But as we know, change is hard fought and hard won. The first album looked outwardly at the world, but I feel like I've got a lot better at coping by looking after myself first. And that's not selfish, working on yourself internally. I've done a lot of that, and it means I'm not blaming other people for my misery!

And, overall, it's got the feel of an album that is dying to be played live, in my opinion.

SMITH: I think it will open us up to some new people, new opportunities and maybe even close [off] the people who are disappointed it isn't really post-punk anymore. I think the best part of it is that we've not backed ourselves into a corner. Everything going forward is completely open now and, yeah, it's a party record. When we play it live, it's going to elevate the album one stuff too, and we've really got to raise our game there. It's exciting! ®

DECLAN MCKENNA BREAKS FREE

The singer-songwriter discusses the more chilled vibe that defines his third album, the pressure on artists to engage with social media, and how he's becoming the artist he always wanted to be

BY NICK REILLY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HENRY PEARCE

TAKE ONE LISTEN to Declan McKenna's third album, *What Happened to the Beach?*, and you'll notice the sunshine that permeates it. If 2020's *Zeros* – released midway through the pandemic – saw him exploring the highs of 70s glam rock and psychedelia, there's a more relaxed groove on this latest record by McKenna, now 25. The title track, for instance, skips along with all the laid-back energy of a day out at its eponymous location.

It's a natural occurrence, he explains, given that vast chunks were recorded in the sun-soaked climes of Los Angeles. "It's got that sense of sun and freedom that you might associate with LA."

There he teamed up with producer Gianluca Buccellati, who has previously worked with Lana Del Rey and Arlo Parks, on her Mercury Prize-winning debut album, *Collapsed in Sunbeams*. It is with the help of Buccellati, as he reveals, that he's created his freest album yet.

What's changed for you between *Zeros* and this, your third album?

Well, we're not expecting a pandemic for starters! I've got more control this time around, whereas the last [album] felt a bit like making the best out of the situation. We did one music video last time, just as things were getting weird, but then we went into full lockdown, and that was very intense. It was a strange time, and I'm just more excited now. There's more excitement all round.

It's quite a sunny record, isn't it? *Zeros* leant heavily into elements of psychedelia, but this one feels quite laidback and languorous.

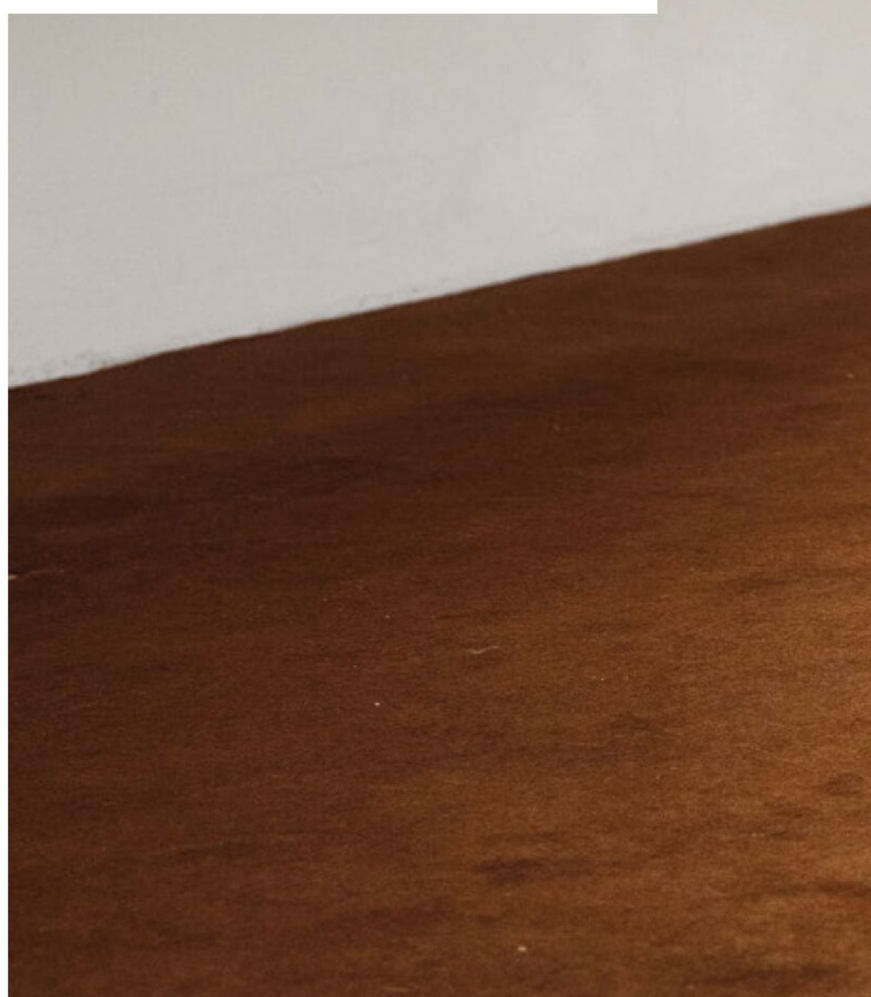
There are psychedelic elements, but it's less traditional in how you hear it. The whole process has been less traditional, and it's not alien now for records not to be made in proper studios, and I've leant into that. I think we tried to see what we could do by spending a bit more time on the recordings and getting perspective as we went along. The songs are more strange, and I love that there's this weird, wonky edge to that. I've taken the spirit of how I like to make music at home and just made a record out of that. Luca [Buccellati] has really helped with that too. It's perhaps a record that can be listened to in a more universal context. It doesn't always demand your attention, which I really like. That's where a lot of my favourite music falls at the moment.

You've said that the new album looks inward — is this you turning the camera on yourself?

To some extent, and there's stuff that just feels like pure intuition. I do think some of the lyrics are almost word vomit because they discuss an emotional state, and I always think that's quite a fun thing to do. There's a more abstract touch and even a more introspective touch to the lyrics.

I almost feel like the album is a symbol of where I've got to as a person: it's about relaxing and feeling more confident in the place I am and [having] the ability to understand myself a bit better. I really like 'Nothing Works' because it's tongue-in-cheek but really takes on that idea of letting go and being yourself, which is brilliant. There's definitely an element to the album that is more about where I've landed and becoming the artist that I want to be. And I think that's true in life as well.

That's a good thing. It's all too easy to forget



you were just 15 when you released ‘Brazil’ and won Glastonbury’s Emerging Talent Competition a year later.

I think I’ve been able to get a bit more perspective on it all now. I’ve been able to slow things down and figure out where I want to take things because, you know, I’ve taken so much on board about myself and making music. When you start out, you’re not actively choosing your path because you don’t know where this thing is going to take you. Whereas now, I’ve settled into myself, and this album has given me so much perspective on the different ways I can go on and make albums. I’ve just wound up in a really exciting position. I’ve got three albums under my belt, and I think I can take it anywhere now.

‘It’s an Act’ is an interesting one because it speaks to a sense of cynicism.

Yeah, but it’s also very relatable, I think! It resonates with me in different ways. I’ve talked about doing therapy, and it’s a song about not wanting to put on a front to impress people, and that’s a big part of maturing, losing nervous energy, I suppose, that makes you act in an unnatural way. In the music world, it does feel like you become a character you can’t control anymore, or that people’s perspective on you is something that cannot be controlled. At times, it does feel like a performance, when you’re going through the motions and performing every night and wanting to put your best foot forward. It’s a cynical song, but I think it’s honest and direct too. Sometimes the cynical thing is not to be upfront, and instead play up to a role rather than acknowledge that it’s a bit of a performance, this. It’s the good and bad in the whole field of working in music. It can be something that becomes really hard to control.

That idea of performance and control is interesting at a time when artists are talking about the pressures of being forced into TikToks and other social interactions by record labels. What’s your take on it?

I’ve got a million different opinions on it because there’s no getting away from using it and the impact of it. But there are certain things which seem to be the standard now in terms of releasing a song. For me, unless something has already blown up on TikTok, I don’t think it’ll always have the impact people think it will.

It’s almost accepted as a buzz word now, but no one really knows what’s going to work. I’ve had a couple of tunes on there now, and we’ve almost given the song away before it came out which hasn’t really felt good to me. You know, that idea of giving away a tiny bit of a song before it comes out, it feels like there’s pressure to give away almost the whole fucking tune before it comes out! I don’t want people to listen to a tiny bit of a song – I want them to listen to all of it! So, I am a bit cynical about that because

“IN THE MUSIC WORLD, IT FEELS LIKE YOU BECOME A CHARACTER YOU CAN’T CONTROL”

for me, trying to have control over TikTok and these other platforms is just not how it works!

I would just encourage any artist not to take it too seriously. There's a lot of pressure to use the platforms, but you really don't have to give yourself away. I just think, 'Is that really how careers are made in the long term?' I'm not sure. I think the answer is still great tunes, great albums, stuff that music fans care about in the long term because casual listeners and fans are not the same thing. I've found that big TikTok moments don't always spread your music around. Just focus on the music. At any stage of your career, make the music you want to make because there's a million fucking TikToks out there. They won't stick around. No matter how good your TikToks are, the tunes will stick around, I guarantee this.

Look, my only experience is making a song – without any backing or anything at all – that just seemed to resonate with people, and that was what started things off for me.

You've spoken about how therapy has helped too.

I did it for about a year before the last album came out. I should probably go back [to it] soon because the album is gonna come out, and it's gonna get really intense touring it! But I found it really helpful to just get a greater understanding of myself and find a way to get in touch with my emotions as well as gain an ability to be honest and direct in a way that's true to me.

I think therapy is really important, and it gives you the tools to manage yourself in life too, through ups and downs. It does help as a songwriter too because if you're feeling more emotionally open and able to deal with these things, then it's natural for that to come through in your songs.

You're working with Luca Buccellati, known for his work with Lana Del Rey and Arlo Parks. What does he bring to the record?

It was very chilled working with Luca. He had this whole ethos that was, to some extent, about capturing lightning in a bottle and cultivating a vibe that creativity could happen in. The idea of working smarter, not harder, and providing the right amount of input.

We recorded at our engineer Simon Oscroft's house too, which meant we were able to go out in LA for the day and come back in the evening or capture a mood that just felt right. We didn't have the pressure of being in a big studio where you have to be pragmatic because things can take longer.

In an intimate environment like someone's [home], you use the gear that's there and the whole process becomes a lot more effective.

Has the character of LA shaped the album then?

Definitely. You can hear the stuff that was written in the UK, and then you can hear the LA stuff like 'Sympathy' and 'Elevator Hum' which have that sense of sun and freedom that you might associate with LA.

But there's songs like 'Mulholland's Dinner and Wine' too which capture the darker underbelly of LA. We wrote that based off people we met at parties, driving around town, and all those things that give you a slightly more cynical scope.

In contrast, 'Wobble' and 'Breath of Light' have a slightly more bogged down, dark and dingy, British stamp to them. I do think the stuff that's a lot more frantic came out of the UK, and that's got to do with the weather!

In 2024, a gig at Ally Pally is on the cards for you.

Yeah, and it's the biggest room I've ever enjoyed going to as a fan in the UK. Really, anything bigger than that, and it becomes less of a fun experience. It's this idea of going up that hill out of your way, but you're going to a really beautiful room, and you're in it with a bunch of strangers that you met on the train, and I just think it's a great moment. That's the venue I wanted to play in London for a long time, and I'm finally getting to do it.

Finally, I'm going to put you on the spot. *What Happened to the Beach?* goes to number one, or your beloved Spurs break a 33-year duck and win the FA Cup in 2024. Which is it gonna be?

Spurs! It's gotta be. As I said, the music will last and not the number one. Like, I don't remember what was number one last week. But God, it would be great to see Spurs lift the FA Cup!

THE WORLD BELONGS TO

21 SAVAGE

He became your favourite rapper's favourite rapper while overcoming all manner of turbulence. We ride along as Savage heads to Europe and starts a new chapter in one of hip-hop's most unique stories

BY MANKAPRR CONTEH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THIBAUT GREVET

Jamika
Johnny
Darryl

MACK IN THE CENTRE of Paris's Trocadéro esplanade stands 21 Savage, face to face with the Eiffel Tower for the first time. It glows in the distance, across the Seine river, as a light rain falls and dusk settles around us. He's flanked by four security guards, all dressed in black like Savage, whose eyes peer out of a slick ski mask and North Face hood.

Savage's team giddily snaps pictures while he looks on, surrounded by a bustle of tourists. A salesman sets down the light-up Eiffel Tower toys he was peddling and volunteers to take group photos of Savage's entourage, which includes Buwop (née Kenya), Savage's right-hand woman and friend of nearly a decade, and Meezy, his manager. When Buwop wants a solo shot, the salesman gives her tips on how to pose in front of the tower like she's pinching it from above. "Oh, he know what he doing!" Meezy says.

At some point, as his friends enjoy the scene, Savage slips away, back into the luxury black SUV that took us here. He's taking it in quietly, but this visit to Paris is a pivotal new chapter in one of hip-hop's most unique stories. Savage is back to Europe for the first time since he was child; until very recently, this was impossible.

Born Shéyaa Bin Abraham-Joseph in London, and raised in Atlanta from the age of seven, Savage, 31, is American by all standards but paperwork. He lived much of his life as an undocumented immigrant; for a while, he couldn't even drive or fly for lack of a government ID. As he made a name for himself as a street rapper with real gangster bona fides and menacing wit, he had to take cheap buses up the coast to label meetings in New York.

But lack of papers didn't keep him from becoming one of the biggest names in rap. The markedly Southern, deadpan, solidly intimidating croak of 21 Savage's voice is unmistakable. Savage used to rap in that same vein-popping squall popular in mid-2010s Atlanta hip-hop. By 2015's *Slaughter King*, though, it cooled into the drawl we know today, while maintaining the kind of flippant audacity you hear on hits like Drake's 'Jimmy Cooks' (where Savage starts his verse with "*Spin a block twice like it ain't nowhere to park*"). "I meant that shit more back then," he says, laughing at his old animation.

Constantly called on by hip-hop's finest – J. Cole, Young Thug, Future, Cardi B – Savage comes off as your favourite rapper's favourite rapper. Drake has been a fan going back to 2016, when he crowned Savage "a young October king with all the juice right now" in an Instagram post. Thanks in part to *Her Loss*, his and Drake's 2022 collaborative album, Savage was the sixth most popular artist in the US on Spotify in 2023. He's given back, too, implementing so many community-service initiatives in Atlanta through his Leading by Example foundation that he was honoured with his own day in Georgia: 21 December.

But his ascent was marred by shocking turbulence: early on the morning of Super Bowl Sunday 2019, after performing at a Nike party in Atlanta, Savage was driving Meezy's Challenger when he saw flashing blue lights and guns drawn. He was apprehended on an alleged visa violation in a targeted operation by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). "We got Savage," he recalled hearing. Savage's lawyers contended he was singled out for his star power, as the Trump administration waged a war on immigrants of colour.

Savage was jailed for nine days at what one expert called "one of the worst immigration detention centres in the US". As he was arrested, he had been preparing to fly from Atlanta to Los Angeles to celebrate the sixth birthday of Kamari, the eldest of his three children. The kids were already there, waiting on him. His mom, Heather Joseph, let them know he wouldn't be making it. Savage thinks he'll explain the whole situation when they're older: "When I was growing up, I didn't know my mama problems and shit," he says. He was jailed during the 2019 Grammys, where he was up for his first two awards – Record of the Year and Best Rap/Sung Performance for work on Post Malone's 'Rockstar', which they had been set to perform together. He watched the awards in his room at the detention centre.

> Savage says his music is "fiction as hell. Some of it be based off of real life, but a lot of it be creative stories"

Savage and his legal representatives say that after a previous visa expired, he applied for another, in 2017 – a U visa, which grants US residency to crime victims who cooperate in their investigation. Four years prior, Savage survived a gruesome shooting – he took six bullets – that his friend did not, making him potentially eligible. The application was pending when he was arrested. ICE claimed that, in addition to overstaying his visa, Savage was a convicted criminal, which his lawyers refuted; he only has a marijuana-possession offence to his name.

Deportation and a 10-year ban from America loomed over him. Celebrities like Kendrick Lamar, SZA and Post Malone, as well as activists and ordinary citizens, rallied for his freedom and citizenship. "It felt good to know people was fighting for me," Savage says. Civil rights organisations formed the #Free21Savage coalition, issuing public calls to action, rallying elected officials, and releasing a star-filled PSA. A petition for his freedom pointed to the historically underreported harassment and targeting of Black immigrants and garnered half a million signatures.

It would take years to sort through his legal situation. Finally, in October, Savage announced that he had become a permanent US resident with the right to travel internationally and return. Drake himself commemorated the moment with a line on his solo album *For All the Dogs*: "*Savage got a green card straight out of the consulate.*"

The pair celebrated by taking the stage in Toronto on 7th October – Savage's first international show, and the last stop of their It's All a Blur Tour, which Savage had played in every city (excluding Montreal and Vancouver). Savage says he had been in touch with Drake about the progress of his immigration fight: "I used to update him and shit because I wanted to do the Toronto show," he says. But while a quick flight to a neighbouring country was special, getting back to his home continent is something else entirely.

Which brings us back to Paris on this drizzly November night. Savage just arrived here to kick off a headlining tour of Europe that culminates in a London homecoming show in a couple of weeks. There are 19 of us moving around Paris together; people Savage considers family. There's Buwop and Buck, friends who grew up near him, and Savage's blood brother Karu, a fresh 21 years old. Then there's 21 Lil Harold, who's opening for Savage on the tour, and TJ, 23, who might as well be his blood brother.

"He's just a genuinely loyal, giving person," says Meezy of Savage, adding that it takes a lot for him to push you away once you're close. "He's going to try his hardest to keep his unit as tight as possible. You got to cross that man. He ain't going to cross you." Meezy, who has been in business with Savage since 2015, had held off on going international, only travelling to London once, on business. "I just told myself I ain't going to travel the world until we can do it together," he says. "'I ain't going to see nothin' before my brother'-type shit."

Later that evening, I ask Savage what was on his mind while he watched the Eiffel Tower so stoically. "Nothing really," he says plainly. "I was just looking." After a lifetime of only knowing it as a landmark on screens and paper, it'd be a lot to take in for most people, but I'm also reminded of something he told me days before: that he generally prefers thinking to himself to talking out loud.

"It's like you're free when you in your head," he said – free of judgement, free of misinterpretation, free of consequence. That stoic exterior, though, belies a trove of curiosity, a soft heart, and a lifetime of resilience, not to mention one of rap's more-revealing testimonies to the peril and promise of the so-called American dream.

AHEAD OF OUR TRIP TO PARIS, I first meet Savage at Doppler Studios, an Atlanta mainstay where luminaries like Outkast and TLC have recorded. His room looks like it could host at least 100 people, but on this Tuesday night, about 10 folks rotate in and out of it. Meezy is a constant; so is Savage's longtime A&R Jennifer Goicoechea, who says she realised he was a superstar when, at his first solo headline show in 2016, Savage had the Atlanta venue completely blacked out, with blood-curdling screams blasting through it for his entrance.

When I walk in, Savage's face is poking out of a ski mask. He's wearing an olive Nike Tech fleece, with his legs kicked up on the studio's slick, wooden centre console, one white Air Force at the bottom of his grey joggers, the other foot in just a sock. He's here finishing up his next solo album, but he's reluctant to divulge details. "We ain't got no mixes back yet," he says when I ask if I can hear a bit of what he's worked on so far. "He damn near don't even like the fact that we be listening to it, and I'm his manager," Meezy adds. "That's why he said it is not mixed. It might sound small, but it's a really big deal for him."

The seminal producer Metro Boomin, who's worked with Savage over the past decade, helped with the new music, even as they both had other blockbusters on their hands. "I got a studio in LA," Metro says. "We would work on the verses for [*Heroes & Villains*, Metro's hit album from December 2022], and at the same time, I feed him beats when we work on the stuff for his album, and he was working on *Her Loss* in the front room at that time, too."

Savage spends a lot of time in the studio; it's one of two places he tends to find himself. "I just go to the studio, go home," he says. He can't really hang at any Atlanta haunts anymore – he's too famous for that. Does that feel limiting? "Nah, I love being at home. Home is fun to me."

His three children have a low tolerance for their father's fame, he says. "They hate when people try to ask me for pictures," he tells me. "They'll argue with each other: 'Hurry up before they start trying to take pictures with Dad. Let's go.'" Kamari is 10 now, and Savage has two eight-year-olds – a son, Ashaad, and a daughter, Rhian, who wants to be an actress and has already begun taking lessons. All of his kids like sports, and he loves taking them to the trampoline park. He doesn't play or discuss his music with them, he says, and they're not particularly interested in it, either. "My daughter would just be like, 'Make a song about me,'" says Savage. "But other than that, nah."

Though Savage is now free to travel the world, his people remain the centre of his. "When I lost my mom, God bless her soul, he came over to my house with my brothers and sisters," Metro says. "Even while I'm over there just crying or whatever in the other room, he over there talking to my grandma for hours. None of that has anything to do with making an album. You feel me? But all that stuff counts."

Savage's schedule switches up often, but lately, in addition to spending time with his kids, it involves riding motorcycles through Atlanta (*Biker Boyz* happens to be his favourite movie), hitting the studio in his premium work hours of 8pm to 1am, then playing *NBA 2K*. He often goads friends like Landstrip Chip, another artist in the studio with us, into playing with him before getting an impressive seven hours of rest ("Hell, yeah, I'm going to get my sleep," Savage says proudly). He says *2K* grounds and relaxes him, as does Spades. He asks me, out of the blue, if I know how to play. "No, I don't," I respond. "Why?"

> "I got shot on my birthday, and got into an accident my other birthday. I felt like my birthday was cursed"

"So he can take your money. Leave him alone!" Meezy interrupts. "You're going to lose every match."

At Doppler, Savage tells me that his music is "fiction as hell". "I just think of it in my head," he says. "Some of it be based off of real life, but a lot of it be creative stories." All great works of fiction are rooted in reality, though. One of the triumphs of Savage's 'A Lot', featuring J. Cole, which won them the Grammy for Best Rap Song in 2020, is the way he boils his lived experiences down to universal truths: *a lot* of people cause harm. *A lot* of people die.

Savage sold hard drugs, he told *Fader* in 2016. He's robbed people, a friend of his told the magazine. Though they'd try to ensure the properties they hit were vacant before clearing them out, "sometimes we had to shoot our way out", the friend said.

He's also suffered deep losses – among them, three brothers. Two were biological kin, both younger than Savage, the eldest of 10 siblings. In Atlanta, his brother Quantivayus "Tayman" Joseph was killed in 2014, reportedly in a botched drug deal, inspiring the dagger tattoo on Savage's face. In London, his brother Terrell Davis-Emmons was stabbed to death in 2020. One brother was chosen family. Known as Johnny B, he was killed on 21 Savage's 21st birthday, 22nd October 2013. Savage was with him and got hit six times himself. He thought he might die, too, but managed to call 911 with just one working hand after unsuccessfully knocking on a nearby door.

He only began celebrating his birthday again recently. "I got shot on my birthday, and I got into a car accident with my mama on my other birthday," he tells me. "So I always felt like my birthday was cursed or some shit. I just used to sit in the house on my birthday every year." He now has an annual blowout in Atlanta – Freaknik-themed in the past, and early-2000s-themed this year.

Though violence has been a recurring motif in his life, he's also actively denounced it. He's talked to students in an anti-gun programme, spoken out against shootings in his vicinity, and tweeted "Atlanta We Have To Do Better Put The F****** Guns Down !!!!!" in 2022 – to which people responded by implying he was being hypocritical, tweeting his lyrics, like "*Shot that nigga 20 times, damn, this nigga lucky*," back at him. "A Song Is For Entertainment It's Not An Instruction Manual On How To Live Life In Real Life I Give Away A lot Of Money And Spread Financial Literacy To My Community Stop Trying To Make Me 1 Dimensional," he responded.

In a quiet moment in the studio, Chip says, "We got it so good over here," after watching a clip of a rocket being launched; Savage asks if it's from the Israel-Hamas war. I ask Savage what he thinks when he hears sentiments that we're better off, knowing the carnage that has touched him right here in Atlanta.

He can't quite wrap his head around what he's heard about the war. Without naming a side, he says, "I could never be that coldhearted, though. Even the person that just greenlights that – the person who says, 'Yeah, you got to drop a bomb on that shit' – how could you sleep at night knowing you just dropped a bomb on 40 kids?" He's not referring to any particular incident, and like many people, he has a surface understanding of what's happening, though he wants to learn more. He asks about the origins of the conflict and looks up the region's geography on his phone.

When Savage is finally ready to record at Doppler, he slips into the left-most corner of the wide booth, out of sight for most people in the room, and sits on a stool in complete darkness. He can only be heard through the headphones worn by his recording engineer, Isaiah, at the desk. Up to his second album, *I Am > I Was*, Savage would let the whole room hear him, but now he prefers his privacy. "I think back when it started getting more like a job, I got like that," he says.

With Savage in the dark, I can ever so slightly make out his silhouette leaning on the chair, his waist at the edge of its seat. I can see the light on the slim, steely vape that's almost perpetually on his person. When he's rapping – freestyling and punching in, here, he tells me later, though sometimes he writes out lyrics – he sits on the stool and swivels himself gently, his hands ticking slightly. Otherwise, he's still.

Goicoechea, his A&R rep, offers me her headphones to listen in. The beat is easy-listening trap, if you will. He's working out the kind of bars of his I love over it – curt, quippy, unvarnished, and darkly funny. "*I got turnt, now I'm the chosen one*," he plays with. "*I ain't have no car, I stole me one... Where my opps at? Nigga, show me one*."

When I see Savage next, he's done recording,

and his face is bundled in his ski mask and fleece hoodie. "She can hear this song," he instructs, much to my surprise, as Isaiah cues it up. Savage hits some catchy singsong-y melodies on it, but naturally, raps about sex, clothes and get-back, as he is wont to do. He employs coital lore that doing the do has made his partner's butt bigger; he brags on an expensive pair of leather jeans; he warns that the last person who got too big for their britches ended up like a certain friendly ghost. It may sound like standard rap fare, but Savage is gifted at making it leaner, meaner and more clever.

When I tell Savage I admire his sense of humour, he asks, "If I'm serious, but you think it's funny, *am* I funny?"

IN PARIS, AS WE DRIVE AWAY from the Eiffel Tower in the SUV on stone roads dense with old buildings, Savage remarks that the city doesn't look that different from New York – just wider streets. This, in turn, brings up memories of the tight roads in his first city – London.

His most vivid memories from there are set at his two grandmothers' houses. His mom's mom has passed, but his dad's mom is still alive. The only plan Savage has set for his personal time in London is visiting family, particularly his grandmother, whom he hasn't spoken to in a few years. Savage knows she still lives in Brixton, as he did. "I ain't told her," he tells me. "I'm just going to pop up."

His father's family immigrated to London from Saint Vincent, an island in the Caribbean between Saint Lucia and Grenada. Brixton has historically had a large Afro-Caribbean population.

Savage was largely raised without his father, but he's close to his mom, who will return to London with Savage for his show. She's from east London, where Savage spent time as a child as well. Her family is from Dominica, another Caribbean island. "My granddaddy spoke French," Savage tells me, "broken French." When I ask why, Savage pulls up the ugly, exploitative history of French (and English) colonization on his phone, noting that Dominican French Creole became the common language.

His mom and an older cousin taught him a bit about their Dominican culture. "We got indigenous people there, villages and shit. She got a whole documentary on it," he says of his cousin, whom he thinks of like an auntie. His mom's cooking kept them close to Dominica. "It's like Jamaican food," he explains.

Savage says his mother moved him and his siblings to the US in search of a better life. They didn't necessarily find it, and young Shéyaa grew up amid poverty and violence. "I think it was the same shit [as London], really," he says. Savage often raps lovingly about his mom, and I ask him when, as a child, he remembers her being proud of him. He tells me that, in the fifth grade, he won a spelling bee; he remembers acing some math competitions, too. She was always happy with him, he says, despite the difficulties.

Shéyaa found his way into illicit money around the sixth grade – selling a little weed – to pay for his own mobile phone. Around the same time, at age 12, he made friends with a boy called Skiney, who was killed in 2021, he tells me. Skiney lived below him; they'd rap and make up songs.

Years later, at about 18, Savage came into big money in the streets, and he put it toward studio time. "I had hit a lick for like $80,000," he says. "Me and my partners, we split it four ways. I already had a little money just from hustling, then had an extra $20,000, so I was just trying shit." The name 21 Savage, he has said, represents the 2100, a Decatur gang he was affiliated with; a former propensity for theft and shooting; and the deaths that came with that life.

As Savage put more stock into rapping, he found a manager, Kei Henderson, and sent what would become his breakout song in Atlanta, 'Picky', to one of the city's hottest club promoters at the time – Meezy, also from Atlanta's Eastside. "He wasn't really fucking with it," Savage told me at the studio, with Meezy listening in. "He wasn't really responsive like that."

"Don't let him act like he was just a rapper following his dream, man," says Meezy, on light defence. "To me, he wasn't a rapper. He was just a nigga who made a hard song from the street." Soon, though, Meezy became a fan, then co-manager, and in 2019, Savage's sole manager.

Savage's shift out of the streets was gradual. "I never really stopped doing my thing until the music just took off," he says. "It consumed my time, so I didn't have time to do nothing else. I was getting booked. I seen it working. Once I seen it started working, I started just putting more of my all into it."

Savage met Metro Boomin around 2013. "Before we got close, I'd just be like, 'Hey, that's just the nigga that smoke cigarettes and look mean all the time and don't talk,'" Metro says. "He ain't ever seemed that approachable of a person. I mean, he's still like that pretty much." (Metro does say that Savage has softened some with age, success and parenthood.)

> Savage got out of the streets gradually: "I never really stopped doing my thing until the music took off"

In 2014, Savage approached Metro with a request. "He was like, 'Yo, I'm going to start fuckin' with this rap shit. You send me a couple of beats or something.'" One of them became 'Drip', on Savage's first mixtape. It was the start of a very productive friendship. "I always loved making dark and ominous beats," says Metro. "So it was like a match made in heaven, with how cold and eerie the beats I was giving him, on top of how he would rap, the shit he was saying, how crazy it would be. There was still beauty in the beginning of him not being a professional rapper or just knowing everything about rap. That's what made him so different and unique."

They decided to make a collaborative tape. Metro remembers the two of them in a shitty Austin studio during South by Southwest, cranking out *Savage Mode* fan favourites 'Bad Guy', 'Mad High' and 'Ocean Drive' in one sitting. They chipped away at *Savage Mode* for two years before it was released in 2016, setting Savage on the path to stardom.

Seven years and billions of streams later, Savage is at the pinnacle of his career, though not exactly obsessed with the spoils of stardom. The 2024 Grammy nominations were announced while we were in Paris, with Savage racking up a career-high five nods, including Best Rap Album for *Her Loss*. Three days after the nominations were revealed, Meezy tells me he and Savage hadn't discussed them yet.

THE SUV HEADS to Arthur Kar's L'art de L'Automobile, an exclusive club for luxury-car enthusiasts. When I ask who, exactly, Kar is, Savage tells me "he's the man in Paris," calling back to Kar's guest voice-over on 'On BS', a *Her Loss* song where Kar flexes against fashion week and flaunts his fast whips. Turns out Kar is also a fashion head and friends with Drake; Savage met him on the It's All a Blur Tour.

On the way over, Savage watches videos on social media. At one point, Drake's 'Calling for You', on which Savage is featured, blares from his phone, soundtracking a clip about clothes.

Savage shows Buck and Buwop a meme he finds on Instagram about the pack of orange combs with which many Black folks are familiar, then asks us if we know the real name of an R&B classic that he plays aloud. 21 Savage is a soul connoisseur; there's even an Instagram account dedicated to compiling clips of him singing to himself: songs like 'Hrs & Hrs', by Muni Long, and 'Promise', by Ciara.

The song Savage quizzes us on is Ginuwine's 'Differences'. Buwop hits the ad-libs, but is stuck on the name. So is Meezy. After playing *Name That Tune*, Savage sings along to a cover of Joe's 'I Wanna Know'.

Buwop wonders aloud why men in R&B don't serenade women like they used to. "Y'all bitches some hoes now," Savage retorts with reflexes of a stand-up comic. "Nobody singing to y'all. Everybody sell pussy. Ain't nobody to sing for." We all laugh – me mostly due to his quick delivery and light tone, though attitudes like this can be concerning. Every woman is obviously not a sex worker, but sex work doesn't make one unworthy of love. As ordinary women sexually empower themselves, women in rap succeed while flipping hip-hop's misogynist script, and as everything from dating etiquette to reproductive rights becomes a battleground, the gender wars have got the messiest they've been in my lifetime.

Savage has his own questionable outlooks on gender. When I ask him what his friendship with Drake is like, he says, "I feel like describing male friendships is zesty as hell." That there could even be something feminine or gay (as "zesty" can read

OPENING AND FIFTH SPREADS: LEATHER APRON BY FENDI, JEWELLERY IS SUBJECT'S OWN; SECOND SPREAD: WRAP BY MONTCLER + RICK OWENS, JEANS AND BOOTS BY CELINE; FOURTH SPREAD: JEANS BY CELINE; PREVIOUS SPREAD: LEATHER TRENCH BY BURBERRY

as derogatory slang) about articulating the details of a male friendship speaks to the stigmas, taboos and expectations that isolate men and stifle their expression. I say as much to Savage.

"There are these unneeded parameters around men and the way we expect them to express love or care or friendship," I propose.

"It's needed," says Savage. "That's what separates men from women." He tries to explain that gender norms are useful; emotional outbursts, he says, as an example, should be reserved for women, while men should approach conflict with "logic".

"Like in the argument, a man's supposed to think more about what he say," he says. "I feel like a woman is supposed to cry, like, 'Fuck this shit.'"

Buwop agrees. "The man and the girl can't be emotional," she says. "You have to give the girl room to be emotional."

Their point is that these gender roles create balance, but I say that both people in a relationship can work to achieve balance in themselves to bring balance to the unit.

"I get what you're saying, but I don't agree with it," says Savage before a correction: "Well, I agree with most of what you're saying. I just feel like the man supposed to be one way and the woman supposed to be one way." He acknowledges that we could have this debate all day, but leaves it there.

"The only weak spot I think I got is women," he told J. Cole in a viral clip. "I think the toughest niggas is the softest niggas with women." In 2017, he dismissed online critics who took aim at him for supporting his then-girlfriend Amber Rose's SlutWalk, an annual protest she held against gender inequality and sexual violence. He held a sign that said "I'm a hoe, too," and defended it when the wisecracks inevitably came.

There are love songs throughout his discography – some on heartbreak, like 'ball w/o u', but several rather reverent, like 'FaceTime', 'Special', 'out for the night', even 'Spin Bout U', with Drake. But his music can also be salted with a dash of the objectification commonplace in hip-hop – as fans, women learn to swallow it – and as successful as *Her Loss* has been, the album faced critiques of cruelty, especially levelled because it's where Drake had most virulently tossed aside his own lover-boy image to taunt, degrade and vilify women. Savage has been asked about the album's most jarring moment, on 'Circo Loco', when Drake rapped, "*This bitch lie 'bout getting shots, but she still a stallion*." It seemed to obviously reference Megan Thee Stallion's shooting at the hands of Tory Lanez.

He's said he generally encouraged Drake's candor on the album, but talking to *Complex* – which named him the best rapper of 2022 – he got more specific: "I don't feel like that was his intention [to diss Megan]," Savage said. "Remember when I said I was telling him to not hold back, people tried to twist that to make it seem like I was talking about that situation. That bar was more of, like, a joke bar than him trying to say something about her. But I don't really like speaking on people's situations because life be real."

THE DRIVER MANOEUVRES THE SUV through a nondescript garage door and down a slope, at the bottom of which Kar meets us. Three of the four levels in the building he occupies start on the 10th floor, so the 19 of us take a winding walk upward until we reach his assortment of Porsches, Ferraris and Mercedes-Benzes. Kar and Meezy make loose plans for a music-video collaboration between Savage and L'art, but this meeting feels more like play than work. Savage and his massive crew almost look like schoolkids on the field trip of the year, gingerly exploring the scores of vehicles across the grounds.

An amusing motif in Savage's music is the 12-car garage he's rapped about, so I ask Savage how big his garage really is as he checks out a model of KITT, the black Pontiac Trans Am from *Knight Rider*. (He has the same kind of car in red, though his is a 1979, about a decade older than this one.) After a moment of consideration, Savage says his garage can probably fit 10 cars.

"That nigga got way more than 10," inserts Meezy. "I don't even know how many he got."

"So where do you keep the rest of them?" I ask.

"Everywhere," Savage says.

"And he not even joking," Meezy adds. "Just different areas that he trusts. I bought him a car for his birthday – it's still at the studio."

Savage spots Kar's two rare motorcycles across the room. The first is a Ducatti Panigale V4 S Corse, a limited luxury bike running around $30,000. Savage has a Panigale V2 back home, a slightly newer version. The other is a Ducati 998, a working model of a bike from *The Matrix Reloaded*. Savage mounts the Panigale, revving the engine loudly. "I like that," he says, satisfied, after cutting it off.

THE NEXT TIME I see 21 Savage, he's thrilling a sold-out crowd at Paris's Zénith Arena. His show begins with a white cloth backdrop across the stage. The air swells and ripples the fabric as headlines on Savage's ICE arrest fill it; next, footage of European flags and streetscapes takes over. "This is our city," says Savage, a disembodied narrator, not yet onstage. From the moment he emerges, two spotlights tail him and the background morphs into the Stars and Stripes, waving slowly.

The crowd erupts when Savage emerges, rapping the first words of 'Runnin'', from *Savage Mode II*. As the set goes on, a story unfolds. A stage-length screen behind Savage shows vignettes of the life of a young Black boy who, at different points, rinses blood from his hands, runs through the streets in a frantic blur, and looks lost in the dark. The boy looks nothing like Savage, but endures the kind of struggle, danger and violence we know he has. It isn't all bleak; there are lively graphics interspersed, like a meter measuring the freakiness of the crowd during '10 Freaky Girls'.

Yet, as we come in and out of the boy's POV, the audience is confronted by a pitbull; later, a wall of nightmarish eyes. Throughout the show, a CGI home goes from trap-house commotion – the flash of police lights reflected from the windows and the clamor of disarray filling the air – to an idyllic suburban house, with birds chirping, thriving rose bushes and an American flag draped from it.

For the tour, Savage hired two creative directors, Danny Seth and Ben Wolin, alongside producer Matt Bauerschmidt. Wolin says Savage will explore the motif of the American dream over the next year, though they realise some of the themes apply the world over. They decided to use Savage's global moment to tell a universal story of the dark underbelly of dream-chasing and the turbulent path to a peaceful life. "We pulled a lot of references from Savage himself," says Wolin.

Paris is elated to spend the evening with him. There's camaraderie, with barely any security workers visible. As the night ends, he thanks the audience for being his first stop around the world.

LONDON IS THE LAST STOP, for now. There, Savage makes a slightly different entrance: This time, he's revealed to be behind the white curtain after it plummets to the floor. "London, make some motherfucking *nooooooise*!" he commands before offering a much cooler "I'm back, bitch." He two-steps to 'Who Told You', by British rapper J Hus, who pops up to perform the song. Savage later plays the ultimate hype man to London's latest rap sensation, Central Cee. Then, hearkening back to his Caribbean roots, he hits a smiley sway when dancehall star Popcaan pops out, too.

One of the first things Savage did when he touched down in London was, in fact, visit his grandmother, who was still in the same council estate that he remembered. "She was shocked," he tells me. "She started crying." He visited twice, the second time bringing his kids, who took warmly to the great-grandma they'd only ever known from phone calls. He found time to shoot a music video in Brixton as well. He says the area looked exactly as he remembered it.

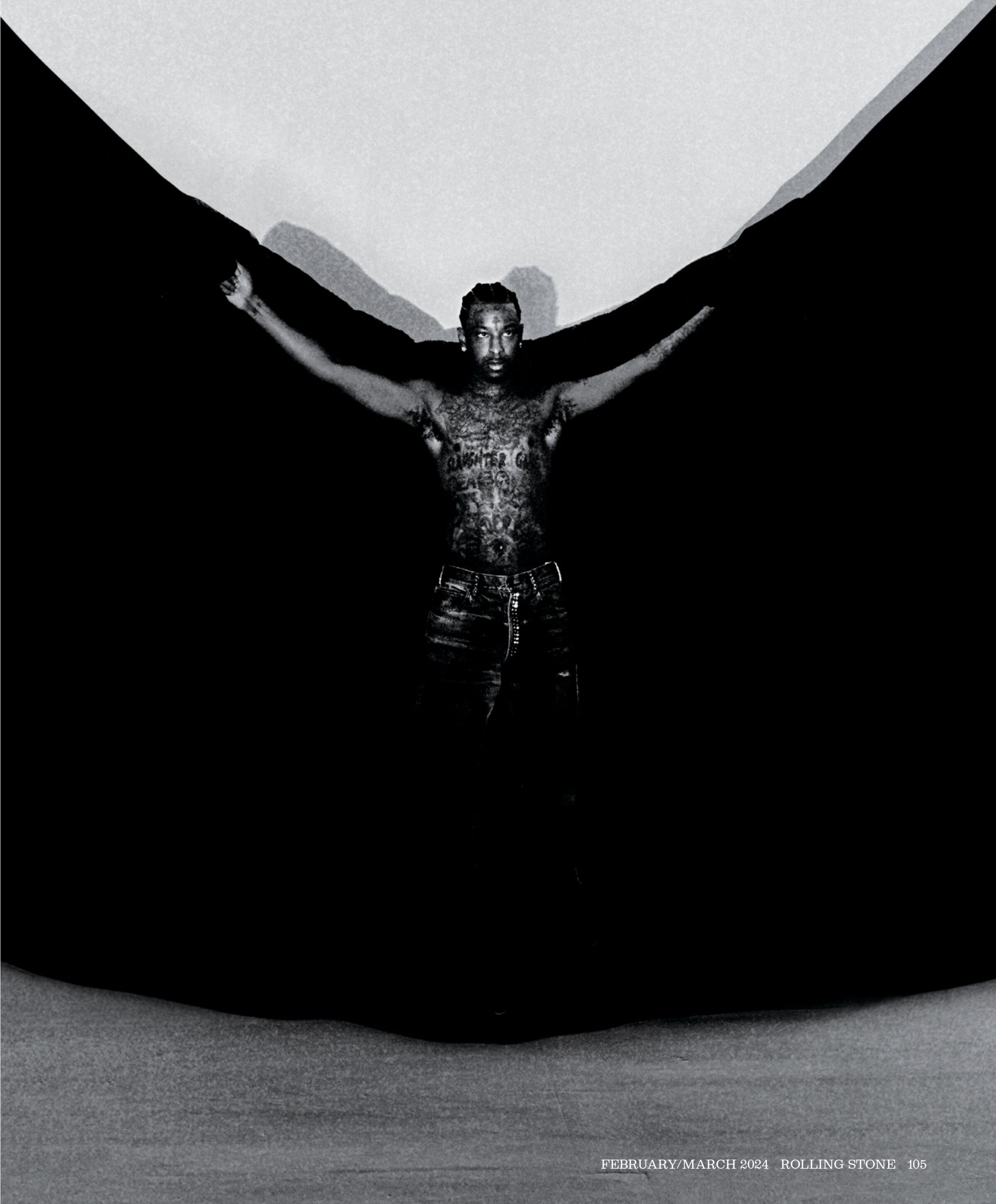
Savage's mom, Heather, joined him on the trip. They took the kids to Windsor Castle, and dabbled in magic at a tour of the Warner Bros. studios where the *Harry Potter* films were made. In his own moment of play, Savage was spotlighted on the sidelines of London's Arsenal Football Club, where he beamed and waved the custom jersey he was presented with.

His kids told him they had fun and can't wait to go back. Neither can he, and he says it won't be long.

"What did it feel like?" I ask him over Zoom a few days after the London concert, while he's settling down at home in Atlanta. "It probably was my most, what's the word...?" he says, pausing for a beat. "Passionate show."

Savage thinks he and the audience shared something special. "I want to thank each and every one of y'all for buying a ticket to come see me," he had told them before the night ended, also announcing he had an album on the way. "I went through a lot of bullshit to make it on this stage tonight with y'all." ®

PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. PRODUCED BY DIVISION: GWENDOLINE VICTORIA, HEAD OF FASHION FILMS AND CONTENT; ANNE-SOPHIE DUJON, SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER; RÉDA MADJID, PROJECT MANAGER; MATEO MURGA, LINE PRODUCER; HAIR BY YANN TURCHI FOR BRYANT ARTISTS; MAKEUP BY LINDZY; STYLING BY FATIMA B FOR MASTERMIND MGMT; TAILOR: GUILLEM RODRIGUEZ; SET DESIGN BY FELIX GESNOUIN FOR TOTAL WORLD; LIGHTING DIRECTOR: HARRY HAWKES; PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY KINU KAMURA AND ROMAIN JOUVIE; DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: THOMAS PORTEVIN; DIVISION PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE: KENZA HASSAN AND EMMANUELLA TETTEH; STYLING ASSISTANCE BY ROUGI; SET DESIGN ASSISTANCE BY PALOMA LARATTE AND GUSTAVE BIRCHLER; UNIT MANAGER: DEJAN TRAJKOV; PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY JULIEN FERNANDES



DJ KHALED CAN'T STOP WINNING

LATELY, DJ KHALED has been listening to a lot of Jay-Z. Namely *The Blueprint*, the 2001 opus that helped solidify Hov as a commercial juggernaut in hip-hop. On an August afternoon in Miami, in the living room of the more-than-12,000-square-foot South Beach mansion he's affectionately dubbed "the Resort", Khaled cues up 'Heart of the City'. He says it's the type of energy that he wants from his upcoming 14th studio album, *Til Next Time*. The kind of music people play "to motivate themselves, to sing or rap along to," he says. "Anthems."

Khaled, 48, has made a life out of motivation. In the rap community, he's been a reliable source of hits rooted in the rags-to-riches ethos of the genre. All he does is win, as he emphatically told us in 2010, and his hustler's intuition has laid the foundation for a decades-long career working alongside some of the biggest names in music, from Jay-Z and Beyoncé to Drake, Justin Bieber, and Rihanna. Khaled's relentless positivity is by now part of the DNA of popular culture. When you hear him chant his name – stretching the syllables in the word "DJ" to their phonetic limit – you know it's going to be a banger.

At home, on the golf course, and into a new phase with the most relentlessly inspiring man in music

By Jeff Ihaza
Photographs by Devin Christopher

WE THE BEST

Despite being something of an architectural marvel, Khaled's house manages to still feel cosy. Across the room, there are kids' toys for his sons Asahd, seven, and Aalam, three, within view, and the family cat, Coco, shuffles pensively around the back hallway. Photos of the family occupy space on pretty much every surface. It's like being at your uncle's house if your uncle had a handful of certified platinum records under his belt.

At home, Khaled makes sure to get dressed up for the occasion of our interview, wearing a Loewe button-down shirt and black trousers, along with a pair of J Balvin Air Jordan 3's. He and the Colombian star recently collaborated on a single called 'Dientes', featuring R&B legend Usher. "He's the biggest hype man in the world," Balvin says of Khaled, before jokingly adding, "And the way he dances is amazing, too."

Khaled wears a pristinely lined haircut. His beard follows sharp angles that enforce a perfect symmetry along his face. When he's trying to find the right word, either for clarity or comedic timing, his eyes carry a piercing seriousness, like an athlete laser-focused on a play. But he's largely instinctive in his delivery – in plucking whatever he's trying to convey from his brain and placing it into yours.

Before we start our first interview, he gets inspired to film a clip for Instagram, pausing for a moment before a new catchphrase comes to him: "Call me tangerine!" he says, referring to his new factory-diamond Rolex with an orange bezel the colour of a tangerine. He does a few takes before landing on the one that his 37 million Instagram followers will eventually see.

Khaled excels at bringing his playful energy to social media, where his witticisms have the same staying power as the hip-hop hits he's so astute at constructing: 'Another One', 'Major Key', 'Cloth Talk', the list goes on. Since his first posts on Snapchat in 2015, Khaled has tapped into the zeitgeist by simply being himself. Lately, he's been on another hot streak, as his musings from his home and, more recently, the golf course have become social media sensations. "I was just telling everybody that's been around me, I'm like, 'Yo, is it me or this energy is happening again?'" he says. "Because I don't plan this. This is just God. I'm watching all my fans going, 'Tell them to bring out the whole ocean,' or 'Cappuccino.' I'm seeing bootleggers making T-shirts."

There's certainly an abundance of material for people to latch onto. Like the video of Khaled asking his private chef about each of the dishes on his plate before abruptly interjecting, "Have you ever played rugby?" Or the clip of Khaled at home one night faced with a bountiful spread of seafood leftovers. As he squeezes a lemon onto some lobster, he turns the camera around and shouts, "Tell 'em to bring out the whole ocean!" Or, perhaps the best of Khaled's recent clips: the one where he casually swings

a golf cart around on the beach, two of its tyres briefly leaving the ground, before driving up to the camera to declare that "life is roadblocks" (except his pronunciation lands closer to *Roblox*, the popular video game for children).

But is it all an act? How is it possible for a human being to radiate so much absurd positivity at all times? "My energy is always at a great level, high level, and I'm a go-getter and nothing is going to stop me," Khaled says. "I feel like God gave me a purpose to find a way to make the world better, and that's a big responsibility. But I'm going to do my best. If you wake up every day and show gratitude, that's how you find happiness."

It's a familiar refrain from Khaled, who's gone so far as to turn his unbridled optimism into a *New York Times* bestseller in *The Keys: A Memoir*, published in 2016. Coming from anyone else's mouth, it might even sound corny or disingenuous. But in person, Khaled doesn't seem to have the capacity for fakeness. His larger-than-life personality and unwavering belief in "spreading love" are reflections of the man's interior. In many ways, it's the reason he's been able to team up with top-flight talent for so long. Khaled might be the purest soul in all of music, something like hip-hop's Ted Lasso. "I promise you, everyone, I don't sit there and think, 'Let me think of something,'" Khaled says of his jokes. "It just comes out. That's just me being me. I'm not scared to be me."

KHALED'S OUTLOOK HAS been a winning formula for years. His studio debut, 2006's *Listennn ... the Album*, premiered at number 12 on the Billboard 200 and quickly established Khaled as the kind of hitmaker who could bring together a who's who of cross-regional collaborators like Lil Wayne, Paul Wall, Fat Joe, Rick Ross, and Pitbull, all of whom appeared on the single 'Holla at Me'. "DJ Khaled is one of one," Wayne

PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES; STYLED BY TERRELL JONES; GROOMING BY MARK MARRERO; TAILORING BY GALINA; PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY SAM ROBLES, OSCAR JORDAN AND DANNY CONDE. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: JOHN LYNCH; POST-PRODUCTION BY BIANCA CAROSIO FOR S.U.I.T. CREATIVE

says. “He’s produced so many memorable tracks. There’s no one like him.” The next year, Khaled followed up his debut with *We the Best,* introducing the name of his future label imprint to the masses. In 2009, Khaled was named the president of Def Jam South, bringing We the Best Music along for the ride. In this position, he oversaw albums from Young Jeezy, Ludacris, and Rick Ross before leaving in 2011 to work under Cash Money.

All the while, Khaled’s releases have flowed consistently every year or so, building out a star-studded universe through accretion. His relationship with Drake has been uniquely fruitful, as the pair have collaborated on hits like ‘Greece’ and ‘Popstar’, both from 2020. He teamed up with Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and Future on 2018’s ‘Top Off’, and sampled Santana on 2017’s Rihanna-assisted hit ‘Wild Thoughts’. That same year, he landed his first and only number one hit when he teamed up with Bieber for ‘I’m the One’ (not to be confused with 2011’s ‘I’m on One’, featuring Drake, Rick Ross, and Lil Wayne).

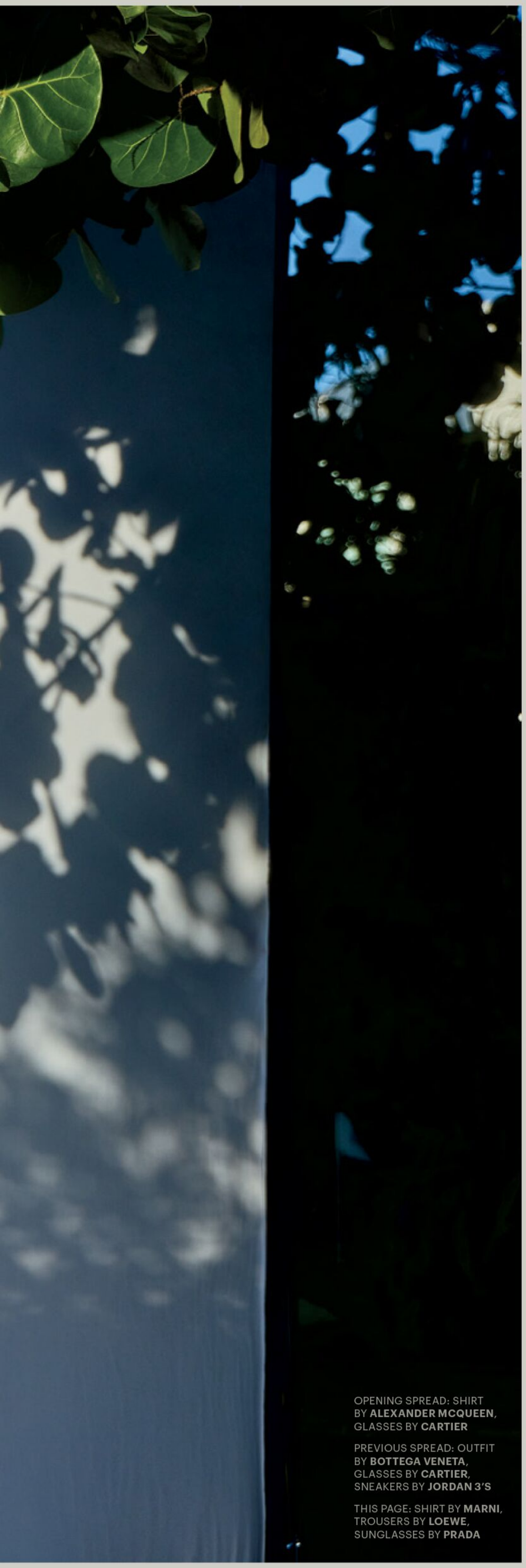
“I feel like God gave me a purpose to make the world better. I’m going to do my best”

Trophies and awards from throughout Khaled’s career surround us in the living room – another necessary flourish for an interview of this magnitude, he explains, as his team lays out his Nickelodeon Kids’ Choice Award alongside a few Grammys and VMAs. As Khaled would say, these are all blessings that warrant celebration. It’s clear that his gratitude is genuine, not an act. You get the sense, sitting next to him, that a part of him still can’t believe the extent of his successes, that these tangible reminders serve as a necessary grounding force.

Even so, there’s not much left for Khaled to conquer musically, which might explain the sense of finality that looms over this next project. In the official album trailer, a promotional tool perfected by Khaled, he alludes to questions of retirement. He also executes a perfect soccer bicycle kick that he swears isn’t CGI. “I’m treating it like it’s my last album. But it’s not a goodbye,” he says. “You’re going to start seeing and hearing about all these new things that I’m doing. I’m going to be doing more TV and film. We taking over the TV and film. That’s what *Til Next Time* is – it’s like, ‘I’m going to give you an incredible album, but also while I’m giving you that incredible album, you’re going to see all these big new moves that I’m doing and new categories that we going to take over.’”

One such new category is golf, a sport that

MARNI



OPENING SPREAD: SHIRT BY **ALEXANDER MCQUEEN**, GLASSES BY **CARTIER**

PREVIOUS SPREAD: OUTFIT BY **BOTTEGA VENETA**, GLASSES BY **CARTIER**, SNEAKERS BY **JORDAN 3'S**

THIS PAGE: SHIRT BY **MARNI**, TROUSERS BY **LOEWE**, SUNGLASSES BY **PRADA**

Khaled says he's started to get serious about in the past few years. He adheres to a daily regimen of playing at least nine holes to clear his head. Of course, the internet is well aware. Khaled's love of the sport arrives in frequent video dispatches featuring his new catchphrase: "Let's go golfing!" He's known to deliver the line with an exaggerated, cartoonish drawl. He tells me he's seen the phrase on merchandise at golf tournaments. And his love of the game is helping to break barriers, with rappers like 2 Chainz and Offset among those following Khaled's lead and getting more involved in the historically stuffy, white pastime. Khaled even recently landed on the cover of *Golf Digest*.

A few days after our first interview, I meet Khaled for breakfast at his house before setting off to the Miami Beach Golf Club for a few holes. Unlike in his videos on social media, Khaled is familiar with each dish on his plate and needs no explanation. The ocean, for now, will stay in its place. There's little time for antics, because Khaled has a meeting back at the house this afternoon, and he wants to be sure to get as much time on the course as he can. Khaled is indeed as lighthearted and fun-loving as he seems on social media. But he also doesn't play about with his golf routine. After breakfast, his driver pulls the cars out front and we get into the back of Khaled's Maybach, one of 150 special-edition models custom-designed by the late designer Virgil Abloh, which Khaled has named the "Cappuccino".

It's a quick drive to the course, where we're greeted by staff who seem overjoyed at our arrival. As we get settled, I notice Khaled pull a few hundred-dollar bills from a green Goyard bag – tips for all the staff, which maybe explains their excitement. After we load up the cart and get onto the course, I quickly learn that all of the things fanatics tell you about golf are true. There is a certain serenity that envelops you as soon as you arrive. The air feels lighter, and you can hear a calm flutter of wind breeze through the grass. The course is lush, with winding hills and a lake that snakes through the landscape bordered by dense trees. The environment is relaxing enough to make you briefly forget the devilish August heat dome we're under in Miami.

Khaled is joined by his videographer as well as his content manager, the creative force behind his endless stream of candid videos. The operation is pretty no-frills, and Khaled is a natural in front of the camera. He warms up with his first swing and lets out an animated celebration that's on its way to becoming a new catchphrase: "Right down the middle, let's go!" I briefly feel like I'm behind the scenes on a TV show, except instead of actors, this is a man's real life. Khaled is playing well today, as far as I can tell. While controlling his body so that it moves sort of like a pendulum, he hits the ball extremely hard, causing it to make a very satisfying sound, and it lands pretty close to the hole on his first try. This, I believe, is supposed to be the main point of the sport.

Another group of golfers ahead of us, who look more like your typical golf crowd, in that they are old white guys, notice us and wave at Khaled to say hello. It's like watching an inverted code switch, as they recite his catchphrases with a cool swagger surely indebted to rap's decades at the forefront of American popular culture. Later, I ask Khaled if he knew the men, and he shrugs, saying he had no idea. Anyone watching would have been forgiven for thinking they were old pals.

DJ KHALED WAS born in New Orleans but raised primarily in Florida, where he's lived for the past 30 years. "I grew up at a special time," he says. "I got a chance to be the young kid in the 90s that heard all that music. And in the early 2000s, I got a chance to live my dream."

Both of his parents are Palestinian immigrants to the US, and they ran a clothing store throughout Khaled's childhood. He has memories of spending time in the store, getting to hold the pouch of money that came in each day. As he's told it, the store fell on hard times at some point while he was in high school. By then, he'd already begun DJ'ing at parties around Miami before he was old enough to walk into a bar. He dropped out of school and started living on his own around age 17, at first taking on any number of odd jobs. At one time in his youth, he says, he was "heavy" in the bootleg-cellphone game, the closest thing to the underworld he's ever been involved with. He was also a ball boy for the Orlando Magic, remembers Shaquille O'Neal's iconic seasons with the team, and maintains a relationship with the Hall of Famer to this day.

All the while, Khaled's main focus was on music. He would DJ on a pirate radio station that showed love to the burgeoning local rap scene, and eventually, Miami legend Uncle Luke invited him to spin on 99JAMZ, the city's biggest rap station. "He let me co-host and be the DJ while I was doing pirate radio," Khaled recalls. "We was doing it big – I was doing both." He also took several trips to Jamaica around this time, learning about sound-clash culture and solidifying his DJ bona fides.

In the early 2000s, he connected with Fat Joe and Terror Squad, who were becoming a heavy force around Miami after getting started in the Bronx years earlier. Fat Joe

recalls being immediately taken by Khaled's sincerity – a rarity in the rap game. "When I first met Khaled, he had an advanced copy of my album on vinyl that I didn't even have," Fat Joe recalls over the phone. "He got nervous because I was Fat Joe, the gangster, at that time, but I fell in love with him immediately. I just saw his charisma, and how sincere he is as a person. And I had him all to myself before the whole world figured out how much of a beautiful person he is, how much of an uplifting character he is."

Khaled started making beats under the name Beat Novocaine, producing a handful of cuts that share the distinct anthemic feeling that's become his staple. He was also a key player in Terror Squad in other ways. "When we did 'Lean Back,' we did it in a studio in his house," Fat Joe says. "I remember when it came to be remix time, I would've never thought I had a chance in the world of getting Eminem. He told me, 'You could get Em.' And I went all out and I got Eminem because Khaled had pushed me to."

Khaled's formative years in radio also made an impression on someone who would become one of his longest-running collaborators, Rick Ross. Khaled produced a song on Ross's 2006 debut, *Port of Miami*, and the two have been close ever since. "He knows what's going to get me excited," Ross says. "He'll run in the room yelling, 'I got some shit, Rozay!' – and nine times out of 10, when he's that excited, it's something that's going to end up feeling good. That's always been the dynamic, since 'I'm So Hood', and the list goes on."

Ross says that the Khaled that fans see on social media is the same person he's been since the early days of their careers. "When we both had Escalade trucks, before we would go to the clubs on the beach, if we stopped and got gas, he would fucking run up – he would pull up, jump out his truck before you, just to stunt," Ross recalls. "So what you watching him do on golf carts and on Jet Skis and all that shit? That's something that's been going on for many years."

FOR ALL OF his boundless energy and enthusiasm for winning, Khaled has experienced setbacks, even if he's more reticent about them. "You never heard me say somebody gave me a fucked-up deal," he says. "You never heard me say, 'Fuck this person, fuck that, this, that, and that,' because that's not who I am. Because I never look at any situation as a bad situation, even if it's bad. Because it's a learning situation for me to do better, right? And I'm a guy with gratitude."

Still, he admits that he hit a crossroads around 2015. Despite all of the overt successes he'd experienced by then, he says, he was "hustling not smart". For one, he was still renting his home, and after investing his own money into We the Best, he recalls having trouble paying the bills, to the point where he feared losing his lease. "I remember I had like a month to come up with this [large] amount of money," he says. The ordeal triggered a perspective shift for Khaled. "I kept saying, 'There's no way in the world that we worked this much this far and we don't have nothing to show for it.' I changed that right away."

Around the same time, he realised he wanted to take a major step in his life. "I was like, 'Yo, if I want a family, I got to get my shit right.' And I gambled on myself. I always bet on myself from day one. But I tripled down that day."

Khaled began firing himself up with what we now know as his "Major Keys". Those keys were more like exercises in staying present at first. In the videos Khaled would post to Snapchat at the time, he was doing mundane things like taking vitamins, getting manicures, and tending to his garden, all with the bravado and charisma of rap's leading hype man. There's an allure to treating your daily life as worthy of a DJ Khaled producer tag, and to do anything less, according to Khaled, would be to play yourself. (The most important key is to never, ever play yourself.) "I was just talking my shit," he says. "I was going through trials and tribulations. I was talking to myself, and, obviously, it was allowing me to feel my feelings. I didn't know who was following me. This was brand-new for me. I didn't realise the whole world was fucking watching."

"Some people work off of analytics," he explains. "I work off of heart, blood, sweat, and tears"

When Khaled famously got lost on his Jet Ski in 2015 – trying to get back to his house after a visit with Rick Ross, still out at sea as darkness fell – he posted through the chaos with a familiarity you don't typically get from celebrities. After all, this was social media, where the primped and pruned presentations of our lives tend to embellish even the most humble of lunch spreads. Khaled, meanwhile, had found a way to connect to the masses by offering up his authentic self. Even if his life was more extravagant, it contained the same raw ingredients. Who among us hasn't got lost, staving off panic with boisterous optimism? "The key is to make it," Khaled shouted as he struggled to find his way home that fateful evening, as the world watched.

On the back of his newfound viral fame, Khaled signed a partnership with Epic Records in 2016, releasing his *Major Key* album with the label that same year. The record found Khaled rising to the forefront of a changing mainstream, as artists' social media presence became a critical force across the music industry. On the album's cover, Khaled sits stoically next to a lion in front of a robust den of flowers, evidence of his keys' effectiveness. The album features one of Khaled and Drake's biggest hits, 'For Free', and was nominated for Best Rap Album at the Grammys. Not long after, Khaled found a way to buy the house he was renting, and a few more for good measure. He also welcomed his first son, Asahd, who was given an executive-producer credit on Khaled's 2019 album, *Father of Asahd*.

Khaled chalks up much of his success to instincts, believing in the power of what you can feel. "You got people that work behind these desks, they hide behind their desks, and they're not even in the field," he says as he drives the golf cart to the next hole. "If you're not in the field, how are you going to feel something? Some people work off of analytics. I work off of heart, blood, sweat, and tears." This year, Khaled returned to his early home at Def Jam, signing a partnership deal with the label to bring his We the Best empire back to where it all began.

Somewhere around the eighth hole, Khaled realises he's running late for a meeting, so we hop back in the Cappuccino and make our way to his newly opened We the Best sportswear store, a partnership with the retailer Snipes. In the car, Khaled tells me about meeting his wife, Nicole Tuck, 19 years ago, and how on their first date she was joined by her mother. He says he knew right away that he wanted to marry her.

As he's telling me this, I notice onlookers craning their necks sideways to get a view of who might be inside the custom Maybach. One thing about driving such a rare car around town is that people quickly recognise you. Khaled seems at ease; when I ask if he ever worries about security or the possibility of an overly aggressive fan, he seems to not even comprehend the danger.

Sure enough, as we pull into the store's parking lot, a swarm of kids follow us up the block and ask for photos, and Khaled obliges. Earlier in the day, maybe around hole six, he'd posted an Instagram story from our golf cart, letting fans know he'd be going to the

JACKET BY **LOUIS VUITTON**, SHIRT BY **ALEXANDER MCQUEEN**, GLASSES BY **CARTIER**

GLASSES BY **CARTIER**, SHIRT
BY **DIOR/DENIM TEAR**

store later that day. The fans heeded his call, though I'm told the scene was even more chaotic on opening day. Nonetheless, Khaled stops for what seems like 100 different photos before making his way to his office in the back of the store.

Our visit is something of a pit stop. Khaled wants to show his fans love, but he also has a call scheduled with a handful of radio stations to promote his new single. While we're in his office, a cleanly decorated space adorned with platinum plaques, some fans stand outside by the window hoping to get an autograph or a photo. After the 15 or so minutes of the conference call are up, Khaled is back on the move, shaking hands and signing sneakers.

Once we get back to the car, Khaled tells me he needs to return a FaceTime call from Mark Wahlberg, who was trying to reach him while he was on the other line. The actor is calling about plans they have for the following week, and both of them allude cryptically to an upcoming film that will be a major move for Khaled once it's announced. When informed that a reporter is listening, Wahlberg says to make sure I tell everyone I'm "talking to one of the best entertainers in the world".

Khaled takes my eavesdropping as an opportunity to tell me more about his new interests. These days, his focus is on horizons unseen. "I'm going to work my ass off to make sure that my kids is good forever, and my queen's good forever, and I'm good forever, and my friends are good forever, and my family's good forever," he says. "I want to see every kid have the world. One of my biggest, proudest accomplishments is that the We the Best Foundation continues to grow. So that's part of the next level. Giving more to the kids."

Khaled's foundation hosted its inaugural golf tournament earlier this year, bringing out more than a dozen superstars in music, sports, and beyond, and raising thousands for programmes that help Miami's youth. Diddy alone reportedly donated $150,000. The foundation is a big part of the Khaled household's day-to-day activities. "Me, my wife, and my team, our rule is to find a way to help the kids seven days a week," he says. "It's about giving back. The more blessings you give, the more love in the world there will be."

Khaled says his parents sometimes joke with him about running for president, but he's never been interested in that sort of thing. "As far as politics, I never got into it," he says. "It's a never-ending conversation of back and forth. There's never an answer. I'd rather be the person that focuses on the solution of being good at all times and working hard and spreading that love, because you can do that."

ORIGINALLY, KHALED TELLS me, he was going to name his new album Love All, Trust Few. It's a bit of a darker mood than fans might be used to – if he'd gone through with it, it would have been his least-ebullient album title since 2013's *Suffering from Success*. "I live my album titles, so I was kind of being careful," he says. "Love All, Trust Few is good, but it can get crazy. I had to make sure I stopped myself early because I was about to get into that zone. I still want to be able to make a record to speak what I feel, too. But it doesn't have to be a whole album of it."

We're back at Khaled's place, in the studio he's built out in the guesthouse. Fun fact: Drake and 21 Savage put the finishing touches on their 2022 album, *Her Loss*, right here at Khaled's house. Drake's stay even inspired the invention of a new cocktail by Khaled's chef – a delightful white-peach spritz.

Once we arrive, Khaled tells me he's roughly 75 per cent done with his album. He plays me a few works in progress, including the track that ended up with the title 'Love All, Trust Few', on which Khaled is indeed on the cusp of a much darker zone. He says he's just got vocals in from Drake on another track that he assures me will have the world going crazy.

"It's about giving back. The more blessings you give, the more love in the world there will be"

"Working with Drake is so dope because Drake is just a genius," he says. "And I have this thing called 'I like what Drake likes.' So, working with Drake, the ideas flow incredibly. I know it's going to be great because I love Drake's vision, and I don't question it and I listen, you know what I'm saying? And the same way, he loves my vision. That's why we work with each other."

He's also got Burna Boy on the album, and he says he's been feeling inspired lately by Afrobeats, finding a similar spiritual connection to the one he feels with dancehall: Khaled's time in Jamaica early in his DJ career gave him a special affinity for Caribbean culture. He also tells me he'd like to work with Tems and, surprisingly, Tyler, the Creator, with whom he says he has a good rapport, despite a social media tussle when *Father of Asahd* was beaten out by Tyler's *Igor* on the charts in 2019. (He says they chopped it up at Jay-Z's Roc Nation brunch earlier this year.)

He's got more songs with Lil Uzi Vert on the way, too. He plays a few more tracks he's working on, including another boisterous appearance from Ross that is sure to deliver plenty of goose bumps. Despite my best efforts, though, he keeps the Drake vocals under wraps. About a month after I leave the Resort, he announces a new target for the album release in the most Khaled fashion possible: by posting a series of photos and videos to Instagram in which he is following Drake through the corridors of a sports arena, smiling widely and holding a giant sign that says "I HAVE 2 DRAKE SONGS ON MY NEW ALBUM/COMING 2024."

I ask Khaled several times if he is, in fact, retiring, and while he's committed to the gnomic response of *Til Next Time*, a more accurate answer might be that he doesn't know yet. What seems abundantly clear is that Khaled is approaching a shift in his life, one that he seems to grow increasingly aware of each day.

Back inside on the couch, Khaled tells me about going to Mecca at the end of last year, a trip that, he says, set this next chapter of his life into motion. "It was my first time in the Middle East since I was a kid, since 1984," he says. "I was with Mike Tyson, and I was crying, and he seen the tears coming down my eyes, and he grabbed my shoulder. He goes, 'I did the same thing the first time I was here too.'"

Khaled spent most of his career avoiding flights after a bad experience on a plane from Jamaica years ago. He'd even gone so far as to charter his own bus that shuttled him around the country during the height of his fame. In recent years, partly thanks to the birth of his two children, he's begun to take planes more often.

When he first got to Saudi Arabia, he performed for thousands of fans at the Soundstorm music festival in Riyadh. "I just remember feeling at peace," he says. "It was almost like a missing key that I needed to make a decision to say, 'Let's do some more and go next-level.'"

A few days later, he went to Mecca to perform Umrah, a rite of passage within Islam. That's when the tears came.

"It felt like I was light as a feather, and then I started walking towards the middle, and I was just crying," he says, recalling his words to God.

"I was just telling Him how much I love Him," he continues. "'Thank you for taking care of me and my kids and guiding us and showing us light.' Showing my gratitude." ®

UNITED
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MUSICIANS ON MUSICIANS

SNOOP DOGG & LAMPO

Two uniquely charismatic rappers, from two different generations, sit down and go deep on their come-up, their studio secrets, the importance of fighting hate with love, and that time Pharrell got too high and left Snoop alone to produce Stevie Wonder

BY ANDRE GEE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICOL BIESEK

LATTO AND SNOOP DOGG are preparing for their Musicians on Musicians cover shoot at Hollywood's historic United Recording studios, when Snoop shouts out a song he'd like cued up: "Can we turn on that '*Rip me out the plastic, I'm actin' brand-new*?'"

Latto lets out a yelp like she just won a Grammy, overjoyed that Snoop Dogg knows the opening bars to her single 'Put It on Da Floor'. Though they just met, the two get along like old friends. They rap 'Put It on Da Floor' together, with Latto excitedly ad-libbing. Snoop records a video for Latto's mother (it turns out, he's Latto's mom's "only celebrity crush"). When Latto is about to put her red Solo cup of tequila down for the shoot, Snoop tells her to stay true to herself, and keep it.

That juxtaposition of the glam and the down-to-earth – Latto clad in a GCDS dress and shoes, Laura Lombardi earrings, and a vintage Givenchy necklace while holding a house-party staple – points to why the 25-year-old is so magnetic. She's stylish and regal, but she's also got party-starting bangers like 'FTCU', which she and Snoop sing at the top of their lungs during the photo shoot.

As she reveals during her hour-long conversation with Snoop, the Ohio-born, Atlanta-based rapper had been performing in talent shows since she was a child (and won *The Rap Game* reality show in 2016), which means she was already seasoned when she broke through with 2020's *Queen of Da Souf*. Mariah Carey (and DJ Khaled) jumped on the remix to her single 'Big Energy' in 2022, helping make it a smash hit, and Latto had her first US Hot 100 number one in 2023 with 'Seven', her collaboration with Jung Kook of BTS. She's on her way towards the stratosphere of stardom, which is why Snoop's advice on navigating fame means so much to her.

Snoop, meanwhile, has become one of the most recognisable human beings on Earth since debuting in 1992, on Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*. In 2022, he purchased Death Row Records, the label he'd helped build into an iconic brand in the early 90s. He survived violent coastal beefs and has routinely reinvented himself through the years. Now, he's a brand whisperer, runs the Snoop Youth Football League, and is a rap elder statesman. Hip-hop's 50th anniversary isn't just about celebrations – it's about vets like Snoop giving upstarts like Latto raw and uncut game.

▷▶

LATTO: I want to tell you how I discovered you. You're my mama's only celebrity crush since I was a kid.

SNOOP: Your mama put you up on the Dogg?

LATTO: My mama put me up on you, for sure. And then my daddy was like, "Hold on, let me put you down." My daddy a hip-hop head. And he loved West Coast [rap]. You, Cube, Dre, 'Pac: Them his [GOATs].

SNOOP: How I got put up on you was [Atlanta DJ and radio personality] Greg Street. He was like, "Man, I've [known] her since she was a little kid. She used to perform in talent shows. She *been* a star." I started discovering your music and I was like, 'I like your style.' You're gangster. That shit is fly.

Let me give you one of my secrets: I remain the biggest kid in the room at all times. Just keep the kid in you. Because that's the inspiration.

LATTO: Somebody told me, "Whenever you not having fun no more, stop it. You got to figure out what's stopping your fun." We blessed to be able to do a job that's fun.

SNOOP: It's two funs that are the most important funs in the world: the *funds* that you make off of the fun that you have. That's why it's not a job.

LATTO: If you could go back and change anything, what would you change?

SNOOP: I've been asked that question probably about 50 times and the answer is always the same: I wouldn't change a motherfucking thing. I love it the way it is. The good times, the bad times. All that shit sculpted me into the man that I became.

LATTO: See, I'm in my head. I'm like, 'Oh, I wish I would've did this. I wish I would've ...' I need to bask in the moment and just appreciate.

SNOOP: How did you get where you got? You didn't get what you got with that attitude.

LATTO: Right. Once you hit a new level, it just be "new level, new devils".

SNOOP: If you're doing what you're supposed to do, niggas supposed to hate. Let the hate shit inspire you to do great. And then at the same time, the only way you could beat hate is with love. You can't match they energy and try to [hate them back]. Nah. 'I'm going to show you some love, I'm going to show you how I do what I do.' That's how I've been able to prevail for 30 years in this music industry. Because there's been times where I've been approached with hate and negativity. Sometimes I dealt with it on some gangster shit. And I was intellectual a couple of times. The business was more important. It wasn't personal.

"One of my secrets: I remain the biggest kid in the room"

— SNOOP DOGG

ABOUT THE PHOTOS

Musicians on Musicians is all about two artists diving deep into the creative process, so it seemed fitting to shoot each of this year's pairings in an iconic studio — from Lindsey Buckingham revisiting the scene of *Tusk* (Hollywood's Village Studios) with Omar Apollo to Big Boi inviting us to Stankonia in Atlanta as he sat down with J.I.D.

ABOUT THE STUDIO

UNITED RECORDING, LOS ANGELES
HIT LIST: Frank Sinatra, 'It Was a Very Good Year'; Lionel Richie, *Can't Slow Down*; Radiohead, *Hail to the Thief*

LATTO: You know what somebody told me? "This game is 85 per cent business, 15 per cent talent." That stuck with me ever since I was a little girl. It might've been Greg.

SNOOP: He telling you the truth. But nowadays, talent isn't involved anymore. They're moving talent out the way because it's overnight successes that they can make. That's why when you really do have talent, you should hone it. Study the greats before you to see how you can stay here for a long time.

What happened to your favourite rappers in the 90s? Where they at? Most of them gone. I'm probably the only one that's still around. It's because of the things that they did or the business opportunities that they didn't capitalise on. So, you got to be a smarter businesswoman and say, 'OK, the women are winning right now in the music industry.'

LATTO: DRESS AND SHOES BY GCDS, NECKLACE: VINTAGE GIVENCHY, EARRINGS BY LAURA LOMBARDI, RINGS BY MICHO, WATCH BY CARTIER; SNOOP: BLACK ZIPPER TURTLENECK, BLACK ZIPPER-LEG TROUSERS, ORANGE SHEARLING TRENCH BY SNOOP DOGG LIMITED EDITION DESIGNED BY TALIA COLES, SUNGLASSES BY CHRISTIAN DIOR, SNEAKERS BY SKECHERS

STUDIO
IN USE

IN USE

This is a first, for the women to be [in] the foreground.

LATTO: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that, too. How you feel about that?

SNOOP: You're the first era to actually dominate music. [But] you guys have to understand that here's where the bullshit comes in. They going to make y'all fight each other. That's what they made us do. They didn't want us to join hands and say, "Hey, East Coast, West Coast, down South. I love your music." You from the South. I love your shit. Why I got to hate you from down there? That's what they'll put into y'all Kool-Aid.

LATTO: And we fall for the trap.

SNOOP: But somebody got to be sharp enough to say, "You know what? It's a business. Whatever personal issues we have, we can settle that." Once we start fighting, the money get cut in half. When you're peaceful, you can show up and get all the money you want. I could show up in any hood I want to right now.

LATTO: They don't got to worry about 'If I book Snoop, I can't book [this or that artist].'

SNOOP: None of that. And that's your business. You're going to have opportunities where somebody going to book you for a wedding that's going to pay you more than you getting paid onstage.

LATTO: Bar mitzvah money.

SNOOP: No, for real. I did a bar mitzvah for some kids that was, like, five years old. I'm doing the radio version. They doing the motherfucking dirty version. So I'm like, 'Fuck it, we going to go dirty.'

What's your studio routine?

LATTO: Right now, I'm in a mode where [in the studio] I got the mic in the room, not in the booth.

SNOOP: Like, 'Where everybody at?'

LATTO: Yeah, I want to be with everybody. I'm like, "Y'all fuck with that? If I say this, you know what that mean?" I might FaceTime my sister, "If I say this, do you get what I'm saying?" So I taking opinions, and I want to just go in there and have fun. I be sitting right there talking, drinking, smoking. And then I step right to the mic and let it all out right there.

SNOOP: At my studio, I got a room called the Mothership, and it's like a spaceship. I like it real dark and moody. But when I go work with Dr. Dre, this nigga got a microphone [outside the booth]. So, you got to rap with everybody right here. You say some wack shit or it ain't right, nigga, you going to know right now. It's pressure.

LATTO: One thing about it though: when I got the mic in the room, I don't like just let anybody in there.

SNOOP: This nigga have anybody in there.

LATTO: See, that's too much pressure.

SNOOP: It's pressure. And I like pressure. I want to be challenged. I've done so much, and I've re-created myself so many different times. What challenge am I up for now? Who can produce me and make me better, to where I don't have to think of everything but just sit back and let you produce me?

My best advice that I lean on in a tough situation is to always put love at the centre of everything. I been in positions where I had gang members and goons and goblins wanting to do shit to me. Instead of me answering the call [with violence], I answered with love.

There was a time in my neighbourhood where certain OGs didn't agree with how I was doing what I was doing. Tried to bad-mouth me. So instead of me going to the hood and "*pop, pop, pop*", I went to the hood and grabbed some gangsters from the east side, the west side, the north side that had never been together before, and did a project and created a brotherhood. I just answered with love rather than "Let me go down there, show you niggas that I can keep it gangster." I can keep it business, and I can keep the homies alive.

LATTO: I can use a few tips. It's a growing process.

SNOOP: The easiest shit for you to do is you.

LATTO: I had my cup in my hand [*during the photo shoot*]. You like, "Nah, keep the cup."

SNOOP: That's what I'm saying. You let them do you. I'm listening to your record. Your records say you be holdin' red cups and shit. Now you want to put the motherfucker down?

LATTO: Hey, baby, Solo cup me.

SNOOP: Quit playing. Pick it up. You see me since we've been in this motherfucking interview, I've been blowing every minute on the minute. And they better not say a motherfucking word about my smoke tactics. Slide an ashtray over here and be courteous.

What's your pre-performance routine?

SNOOP: I like to listen to good fucking music in my dressing room.

LATTO: You told me that. And I ain't believe until you started singing some songs [of mine] you ain't supposed to know. I'm like, 'Hold on. How did he know that? How he know that?'

SNOOP: It depends on [who's around]. I got dancers that be twerking and pole-dancing. When they in my dressing room, I got to put on that ratchet shit. I'm like, "Fuck the club up!"

LATTO: Right. I pray every time before I go onstage. I be like, "Lord, please [keep me] free from injuries or mistakes."

SNOOP: But you be really performing, though. You really going in.

LATTO: I taught myself, 'Don't put no boundaries on yourself.' Because now, I'll be up there dancing, and I swear to God I told them I ain't had no rhythm in my bones, baby.

SNOOP: I've seen you run out there with no shoes on. Kick your heels off like ...

LATTO: I'm calling my dancers like, "Somebody get these heels off of me." In my comfort zone, I be making the stage my home.

SNOOP: It has to be. Those are your people. They love you so you have to know that. Give them all of you every time you up there because you never know when it's your last time up there. I give it my all every time I'm onstage. You can never leave a Snoop Dogg show saying that this nigga was playing.

LATTO: You got to let me know what your favourite memories [are] around your first breakout, first album, first show, first everything.

SNOOP: I had just did *The Chronic* with Dr. Dre. So that was his record, but it was the biggest record in the world. Everybody was waiting on my shit. As a kid I dreamed of having a record with me on it from top to bottom, doing the skits, the rapping, the talking. And to be able to do it with my family. I had my cousins, my homeboys – I had Dr. Dre, I had my best friends. It was the best feeling in the world – the niggas that I started with when I didn't know how to rap good. Now, I finally figured this shit out, and we all on this ride together.

LATTO: Oh, I'm very keen on that. Everybody around me, I known them either since middle school, elementary school. All my dogs that worked for me put their ass in position.

SNOOP: Give me [details of] your first album.

LATTO: I'm 20, 21 maybe? Figuring it out. Just signed my first major deal in the midst of the pandemic. So that was crazy. I'm recording a debut album and the studio's saying, "Only two people can be in the room." And I'm like, "Shit, that's me and a producer. What about my sister, my people?"

So in the midst of all that, trying to figure out my sound, choosing beats without the producers there because it ain't enough room. Beauty in the process, I guess. I'm learning the importance of energy, of feeling like you that girl, so when you get in that booth, confidence is breathing through the music.

SNOOP: Everybody got trash music. I got

"[Hearing you] singing my song rocked my world"
— LATTO, TO SNOOP

PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. LATTO: HAIR BY ASHANTI LATION; MAKEUP BY MELISSA OCASIO; NAILS BY ERI ISHIZU; STYLING BY SAM WOOLF FOR THE ONLY AGENCY; TAILORING BY CAROLINA GENCHIG; SNOOP: HAIR BY TA VERYVIP; CLOTHING DESIGN AND STYLING BY TALIA COLES; LIGHTING DIRECTION BY BYRON NICKELBERRY; PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY DOM ELLIS AND SEMIR HAJDAREVIC; DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: MARIA TRONCE GIBBS; STYLING ASSISTANCE BY KRISTEN RICHIE; PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY PETER GIANG; POST-PRODUCTION BY ANGIE MARIE HAYES FOR THE HAPPY PIXEL PROJECT INC

niggas that got music on me. [I ask them,] "How much I got to give you not to put this bullshit out from 1987?" [They're like,] "If you don't give me $50,000, I'm putting out that song that you made."... I started off as a songwriter, writing for Dr. Dre and writing for myself on the *Chronic* album. 'Deep Cover' was the first song that I wrote. And then ['Nuthin' but a] "G" Thang', 'Dre Day', on and on. But being a writer first: 'I want you to win. You the star.' And then it was like, 'Well shit, it's your turn for your album.' But the level that I wrote for him is so fucking high, I'm going to really have to do what I do.

LATTO: Put that pen to work.

SNOOP: I got so many [favourite studio sessions]. One that stand out to me is when me, Pharrell, and Stevie Wonder was in the studio. We smoking. We in a little-ass room. Pharrell's done got high, he got secondhand smoke. Now Stevie in the booth and Pharrell ain't saying shit. Stevie in that motherfucker trying to figure out what to do. I'm like, "Pharrell, produce this nigga." This nigga's so high, he leaves Stevie in the booth and don't give him no direction.

LATTO: He's stuck.

SNOOP: And I'm trying to tell Stevie what to do. I don't know what the fuck to do. I'm not a producer. I told the nigga, "Just play anything." When we finished, Pharrell took all of the good shit that he played. Because he was playing harmonica, singing and shit, and it ended up working. But it was funny to me that this nigga been around me this long, but today he finally gets so high that he leaves Stevie in there. They left a nigga in there, where he had to walk out by himself. Shout-out my nigga, Stevie.

LATTO: Y'all ain't have no camera in there?

SNOOP: Hell, no.

LATTO: Oh, Lord. I had a week of sessions with [Pharrell] in Miami, and I kept [asking] him, "What made you want to fuck with me?" And he was just like, "I fuck with you." As someone new stepping into the scene, it's indescribable to be embraced by people who have already made it in your lane.

SNOOP: The beauty of that is, the same way you feel about us ...

LATTO: It's vice versa.

SNOOP: When I came in, it was people like James Brown, Charlie Wilson, Ron Isley, Roger Troutman. These are people that embraced me. George Clinton, Bootsy Collins. They embraced me the way we embracing you.

And it was strange to me, because I grew up off of that music and I'm trying to be them, and then all of a sudden they know who I am.

LATTO: That be like a real full-circle moment. Like where you got to damn near pinch yourself, like, 'Is this really happening?'

SNOOP: I sat down with James Brown for about three hours. He telling me, "Snoopy, you're going be the hardest-working man in show business. You're going to be this, you're going to ..." He's telling me all of this shit, right? The most important shit he said to me was, he said, "Snoopy, whatever you do, don't you ever cut your hair off. As long as your hair grow, as long as you're going to be in this game."

But he [told] me this shit and I'm listening to him talking, I can't figure it out while he's saying it, but as he passed away, I seen me become the hardest-working man in show business, doing all of the things he said I would be doing with the kids, with positive work, with creating opportunities. Branding, marketing, all this shit he said. It's like I was touched because he embraced me, just like I'm embracing you.

LATTO: And not just me. I see you embrace people, and that shit mean the world to us. Like, you singing my song rocked my world.

SNOOP: But that's what you did. You put that work in. You made it that good, to where I had to check for it. It was that good.

LATTO: And one day ... I hope to have longevity like you.

SNOOP: You will. Your hair growing.

I was telling Latto earlier about the first time me and Rolling Stone [US] had an encounter. Jimmy Iovine was getting at me and Dr. Dre about being on the cover, right? So at the time, I'm a hip-hop artist, I'm a gangster with this. I'm like, "Man, fuck the Rolling Stone, nigga, I want to be on the motherfucking *Source* magazine."

And Jimmy was like, "No, no, you just don't understand. It's *Rolling Stone*. It's the biggest shit ever. You guys are like Keith and Mick." I'm like, "Who the fuck is Keith and Mick, nigga?"

So I end up doing this shit. The day I do it, I put my shit in some pigtails. Like, stupid gangster shit. I said, "Since y'all want me on the cover, I'm going to be a real nigga on the cover." When that shit come out, a week later my record sold a million more fucking copies to a whole different demographic. To where I had to go and tell Jimmy Iovine, "I'm sorry. What other cover would you like for me to take?"

LATTO: No cap. Because we come from a different world. And now you got my mama, a white lady from Ohio [like], "That's my celebrity crush."

SNOOP: See? That's what Rolling Stone did.

Who you want to work with that you ain't never worked with outside of rap?

LATTO: I just did my first acting gig, and I liked it. I was on *Grown-ish*. Shout-out to Issa Rae. I want to get in that world. Issa, hopefully, I'll get to meet her. I didn't get to meet her on set, but we briefly crossed paths at one of them award shows.

The queens like Issa, Queen Latifah, I want to get in that lane, because they're sitting up pretty. They work when they want to work. I would love to get in that world.

SNOOP: But you know what? You so hot you could create your own movie. A short movie. Don't focus on three or four videos. Focus on the movies because you love acting so much. Control the narrative.

What's your craziest fan story?

LATTO: I don't think you had your crazy-fan moment yet till you meet my mama.

SNOOP: Misty, don't do it. Don't do it, Mama.

LATTO: Listen, that alone fixin' to rock her world. You don't know.

SNOOP: All right. I'm going to brace myself for this mama.

LATTO: I went overseas for the first time this past summer. I was over there for probably a month. While I'm signing butt cheeks – like pull the pants down, g-string on, signing butt cheeks – I really got lost. I was finna put a kiss, but I'm like, 'This is raw ass. You cannot put your lips on raw ass.' I was like, 'Whoa, pump the brake. Reel it back.'

SNOOP: But it's crazy how they showed up for you though, right?

LATTO: No cap. I'm like, 'I'm going over there. They don't know who I am.' I'm like, 'Y'all know me in Poland.' Didn't even speak English. I'm trying to tell them "I love you."

SNOOP: You got it going on, baby girl. The power of music is bigger than you could even imagine. There's so many girls that want to be you now.

LATTO: It's crazy though, because I feel like I don't even got it together yet.

SNOOP: You do got it together. You're inspiring to girls looking up to you. And now they discovering your story: "She really did used to hustle. She used to make tapes. Damn, so she just didn't wake up as an overnight rapper. That's why her shit sound different. That's why it feel different."

LATTO: I leave all my history on YouTube, too. I was thinking like, 'Should I clean my channel up?' I want them to see my come-up. Music used to be trash, but, bitch, now I got them M's. ®

"There's so many girls that want to be you now"

— SNOOP DOGG, TO LATTO

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ELEVATE YOUR STYLE

MUSICIANS ON MUSICIANS

GRIMES & AESPA

A wildly original indie experimentalist and a group of Korean-pop idols get together for the first time and find common ground discussing avatars, AI, the character “æ”, and the art of the music video

BY KRISTINE KWAK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIGON KWAK

THE STUDIO

PULSE MUSIC GROUP
(FORMERLY SOUNDCASTLE), LOS ANGELES
HIT LIST: Paul McCartney, *Flowers in the Dirt*; Gwen Stefani, *Love. Angel. Music. Baby*; the Bangles, *All Over the Place*

GRIMES IS A SELF-TAUGHT, self-produced artist who released her first album on a small indie label more than a decade ago. Aespa is a girl group formed during the pandemic by one of K-pop's leading labels, composed of four extremely hardworking women – Karina, Giselle, Winter and Ningning – who sing, dance, and have shot to superstardom over the past three years.

The pairing of the two artists might seem random, but consider this: Grimes' love of K-pop goes back more than a decade, and she's extremely interested in new technologies – including Elf. Tech, an AI music-software programme that allows anyone to replicate her voice in their own music, and an AI girl group she created called NPC. When Aespa debuted during the pandemic, they made the most of everyone remote-living by introducing four virtual counterparts for the girls. The virtual members are part of carefully crafted lore woven into the group's videos and lyrics, and they're called the æ members – a letter, coincidentally, that's used in the names of two of Grimes' children.

Aespa's universe and Grimes' universe clash at the perfect time, as the two artists head in opposite directions: Grimes looks further into tech and the unknowns of AI, while the girls of Aespa – whose new EP, *Drama,* released last November – hope to now be more in the "real" world when they meet.

"There are K-pop groups that fight a lot or don't get along. We never had that"

— KARINA OF AESPA

GRIMES: You guys have some of my favourite visuals in the game. I think you've done some of the most innovative, awesome stuff.

GISELLE: It's like we felt this connection. You are very AI-friendly, and you have drawings and graphic design and all of that. We're like, "Oh, someone else that does that!"

GRIMES: I feel like there's so many random things we've both done that no one else has done. Like the avatars. And I mean, that was one of my favourite things ever, when I saw that you guys each had sort of your digital... Are they called the AI or the æ?

GISELLE: It's called æ-Winter, æ-Ningning.

GRIMES: I always appreciated that you guys had one foot in the digital realm so profoundly and one foot in the real world, I guess.

GISELLE: We started with the metaverse thing because we debuted during Covid, then went on to doing more live performances. We felt very cyber, I guess. And for you, it's like you started doing live performances then went on to doing a lot more things on the metaverse. We are doing the same thing, but kind of in opposite directions, right?

GRIMES: Yes. But I think it's kind of beautiful. I feel like limitations are really good in art, and you guys made great use of that limitation. Live music is nice, but there's a lot of innovation that can happen in the music video.

WINTER: I've been curious about where you get your inspiration.

GRIMES: I don't even know. I kind of just kind of jam. Like you guys, I'm interested in the interplay between technology and music. [You're] in this pop-idol context, but there is all this high-concept subtext. I like the euphoric gratification of pop visuals and pop music, but I also like throwing in weird things like how you guys deal with metaverse and identity.

Like in your song 'Girls'. There's some crazy lyrics there. This is going to be a bad translation, but, "*Metaverse exists / Now parallel world / All beings have meaning / Part of my heart / We use sympathetic words / And share body temperatures / And in the end, we only pursue / The value of goodwill*." I was like, "Beautiful!"

NINGNING: Wow! Giselle's part from 'Girls'.

GISELLE: Wow, that's so crazy how you translated that so well.

GRIMES: Oh, I didn't translate. I mean, the internet translated it.

GISELLE: But that is so cool. I didn't think about it in English at all, so to actually hear in English... it makes sense to me now.

GRIMES: And this one I like more: "*The algorithms have been / Distorted by bad desires / They use existence as the weapon / And swallow with destruction / Evil was started at that moment*." I was just sort of reading translations of your lyrics preparing for this, and I was like, 'This is not normal pop lyrics.'

GISELLE: Completely not normal lyrics. Yeah.

GRIMES: I actually followed you guys before you debuted because I saw Aespa with the "æ" letter, sort of like an ancient dramatic letter, or whatever, that I'm really obsessed with. It's my son's middle name. [In Aespa], what does the "A" stand for?

GISELLE: Avatar.

GRIMES: It was avatar and... exists?

GISELLE: Experience.

GRIMES: How much do you feel like it's important to bring the past into the future? And do you care about language in that way? You created a visual aesthetic even just to the word itself of your band name.

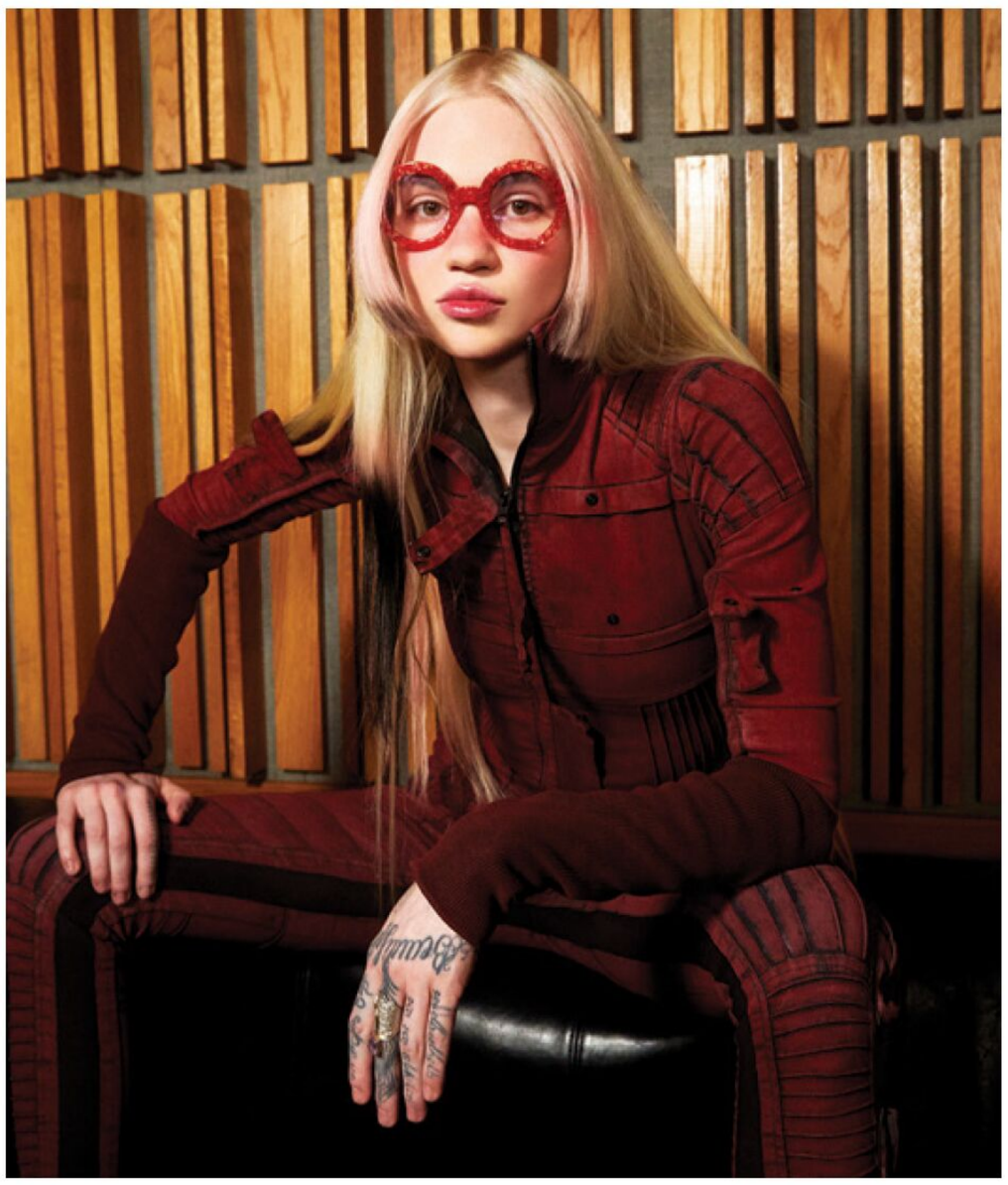
KARINA: The "æ" we use is primarily "avatar" and "experience", so that's right. Rather than looking back at the Greek roots, in our metaverse, we engage with our avatars and experiences – we are friendly with them at times, we fight with them sometimes. There are a lot of stories that are part of that. We needed a new word to define those moments. The logo came out nicely with that character, too. I have a personal question: do you like exercise? [*Laughs*.]

GRIMES: Do I like exercise? I hate exercise.

NINGNING: Me too.

GRIMES: I need it to be gamified. I need to be in an obstacle course or something like that. Yeah. Do you guys like exercise?

AESPA: HAIR BY YOON SEOHA; MAKEUP BY CHO EUNBEE; STYLING BY LEE BAEKHAP, GRIMES: HAIR BY LAUREN PALMER-SMITH FOR FORWARD ARTISTS; STYLING BY TURNER; STYLING ASSISTANCE BY JOEY SIGALA; OUTFIT BY DEMOBAZA; PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY ANDREW HARLESS AND PETER BYUN



"I have my album and an AI album. I'm going to make them compete"

— GRIMES

KARINA: Not really. I wanted to ask because you look so fit in your outfit.

GRIMES: Oh, thank you. I don't know if I'm the most fit, but you know what? I carry babies around a lot and I've been like, 'Ooh, am I getting a six-pack?' I might be accidentally exercising, actually.

GISELLE: One of your songs I really like is 'Easily'.

GRIMES: Oh, wow. That's the most hated by the fans. No one's ever said that to me before. Thank you.

GISELLE: I tend to like songs like 'Easily' and 'California'. How did you come up with that vibe?

GRIMES: 'California', I think I was just doing Taylor Swift cosplay, but it's also vaguely about how the media is obsessed with portraying you as this troubled soul or something. I don't know if you guys get that the same way in your media.

GISELLE: Oh, we definitely get that. [*To the members in Korean*] Like how the media tries to portray us badly, scandals, things like that.

GRIMES: I feel like some of the K-pop media is so savage sometimes. I feel like the K-pop fandom could be so amazing, but then so aggro, expecting so much.

GISELLE: For sure. While K-pop fans can be so great, there are also scary people out there.

NINGNING: I really love your music, but I also like your artwork, like your paintings. I saw you have a lot of tattoos. Are they designed by you?

GRIMES: Actually, rarely. What I normally do is I find a tattoo artist that I really love and let them do their best work on me. Do you guys have tattoos?

NINGNING: Yeah, I have three. It's so small. My design [*laughs*].

GRIMES: That might be the smallest tattoo I've ever seen.

NINGNING: I love tattoos, but I just can have a small one. I'm waiting for your next album. Do you have some plans?

GRIMES: It got held in limbo for a while, and then I started making a new album. My management is killing me because they're like, "We have a whole album, why won't you release it?" I have a bunch of stuff coming up that I'm really, really excited about. I went through this process of labels, and there is always a lot of pressure to make the first single the most commercial thing, all this stuff. I'm trying to focus on the singles and the videos. I have my album and an AI album, and I'm going to make them compete.

GISELLE: Oh? Really?

GRIMES: Yeah, it's sort of an experiment about AI versus humanity. I'm working with a bunch of kids using various types of AI in the Grimes style. I'm feeding them training data and various things. They're doing the AI thing and all the art for it. And then I'm doing my thing and the art for it. I want them to compete.

WINTER: I heard a little bit about Elf.Tech. It's such an innovative idea – to have a song with your voice without you singing. How is that progressing?

GRIMES: We've created a voice emulator that uses AI. So if you sang into it and you sang like "La, la, la," it would be my voice. What we're doing is we are letting kids basically make music, use my voice, open-sourcing Grimes, and not punishing them for distributing that music. And in some cases, if they do it through us, we can collect royalties for them, but they're also allowed to do it through another label.

GISELLE: Were there results you enjoyed from it?

GRIMES: There were some people that did better versions of things I wanted to do than I would've done. And a couple of people actually got signed from the songs that they did.

GISELLE: That's so cool. You're helping people.

GRIMES. What's it like working [together]? I feel like you guys are together so much of the time.

KARINA: Even though the four of us have such different personalities, there's something that makes us mesh so well. We get each other even without having to speak. To be honest, there are K-pop groups that fight a lot or don't get along. We never had that.

GRIMES: Very sick. Touring's hard, huh?

NINGNING: Yes [*laughs*].

GISELLE: [*Laughs*] It's hard. Physically.

GRIMES: I wanted to ask about the music-video process. I feel like it's a medium that America is losing, but it continues to innovate in Korea.

GISELLE: What we say in Korean a lot is "Music you can see." A person is not fully getting the K-pop experience if they don't watch the video.

GRIMES: What music do you guys listen to?

NINGNING: I really love techno. So I really love your music. Yeah, it's sci-fi and futuristic, so techno and R&B? Yeah, R&B.

GRIMES: What's your favourite techno right now?

NINGNING: Grimes [*laughs*].

WINTER: I listen to a variety of genres, but I listen to older Korean music, and I like band sounds.

GRIMES: I'm an old-school K-pop fan.

GISELLE: Oh, my God, me too.

GRIMES: My allegiance to G-Dragon and TOP is very real. I actually knew CL a long time ago, for a while. One of the beginning things of Grimes is I was so obsessed with K-pop videos. That's what got me into directing videos. I've also always been obsessively into finding weird parts about music. I started noticing it rising in 2010.

GISELLE: 2010? Wow. That's OG.

GRIMES: Do people call that first-wave K-pop? And this is fourth-wave K-pop?

GISELLE: Generation. First generation. My stepfather bought some of your artwork, these really small... I don't really know where it came from, but it looks like something you ripped out of a notebook.

NINGNING: I knew you because of your artwork first too. I didn't know you did music, too.

GRIMES: I was slightly worried it's a one-sided relationship. I was like, "Do they know who I am?"

GISELLE: We used to say to our management, "We want to do something with her." We've always had a lot of interest in you.

GRIMES: Same, same. This is an honour and very exciting. ®

OMAR APOLLO & LINDSEY BUCKINGHAM

Why did a genre-hopping 26-year-old star ask to sit down with a rock icon nearly five decades his senior? Because the icon wrote a song that changed the younger artist's life

BY TOMÁS MIER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA WHITE

"I DIDN'T BRING MY STILTS," dad-jokes Lindsey Buckingham as he eyes Omar Apollo, all six feet five of him. Apollo lets out a chuckle as he leans against the recording console, where Buckingham's band, Fleetwood Mac, happened to have made *Tusk* 45 years ago.

Buckingham, a 74-year-old guitar hero, might seem an odd pairing for a 26-year-old Mexican American star who makes tear-jerking alt-R&B. But as Apollo, who asked Buckingham to join him for Musicians on Musicians, puts it: "I got layers, you know?" (That's evident as the singer jumps between playing the Cocteau Twins and norteño legend Ramón Ayala during the duo's photo shoot.)

Once the men sit down for their chat at the Village, the legendary LA studio, they realise their connection is more than just musical. Perhaps, fateful. Buckingham made *Tusk* here. Apollo dropped his breakthrough album, *Ivory*, in 2022. "That's crazy," Apollo says. "We both have the elephant thing."

Apollo's conversation with Buckingham arrives at a pivotal moment in his career. He earned a Best New Artist Grammy nomination, his song 'Evergreen' went platinum, and his excellent new EP, *Live for Me*, came out last October – the success is coming swiftly, and he's at a clear turning point. Buckingham knows that feeling all too well: it happened after Fleetwood Mac dropped their blockbuster album *Rumours*. He has some advice to impart about fame, songwriting, and going your own way as an artist.

▷▶

Omar, you wanted to talk to Lindsey. I would love to hear why.

APOLLO: Well, there's a song that you made that has so many memories attached to it, that I'm obsessed with, that literally changed how I wanted to look at music and make music.

BUCKINGHAM: And what song was that?

APOLLO: It was 'Never Going Back Again'.

BUCKINGHAM: Oh, wow.

APOLLO: Actually, there was this guy that I had a crush on. He was in love with that song. And so, I was like, "I'm going to learn it."

BUCKINGHAM: And did you?

APOLLO: No, I couldn't learn it. It's impossible! I literally was sitting on tour having my friend teach me. "Teach me how to do this picking. I can't do the picking." It is such a specific pattern and rhythm. And my head is hurting. I was losing it: "It's so hard."

BUCKINGHAM: The song has changed a lot. If you listen to it on *Rumours*, it's one thing, and it evolved into something different onstage over the years.

APOLLO: I watched a live video of you singing it. And you don't say it on the record, but you say it in the live version: "*I've been down three times*." And I was like, "Man." I remember driving in my friend's Mini Cooper in the desert, we had gotten done a big night of partying. And then I just blast this song, and I just remember feeling like, 'Oh, every time I put this song on, it makes me so happy.' And that's something that I feel is very rare in music – for something to just affect me like that. I just want to do *that* one day, you know what I mean?

[*Buckingham nods.*]

BUCKINGHAM: I love how you use vocals on *Ivory*. What's the fourth track called? The one with Daniel Caesar on it?

APOLLO: 'Invincible'.

BUCKINGHAM: Yeah, your use of vocals is just so sublime. And 'Killing Me'.

APOLLO: That's crazy to hear you say that.

BUCKINGHAM: Are you playing a lot of the stuff on that?

APOLLO: I'm playing a lot of the acoustic guitars on that. That was me on 'Invincible'. Kind of folky, then it turns into this Radiohead drummy thing.

BUCKINGHAM: That's part of what's interesting, is you're cross-breeding. You've got these elements of R&B and soul, but then you've got beats that are more referencing hip-hop. The only thing I didn't like about it was it's too short.

APOLLO: You thought it was too short?

BUCKINGHAM: I mean, it was just an intro piece. I was thinking, 'Oh, he could do a whole song like that!' It's so delicate. It's what you're not doing in a lot of ways that's so great, too. What I think your challenge will end up being... You're poised to get to the point where these external forces are going to expect a certain thing from you. I got to that point post-*Rumours*. *Rumours* started off about the music, then the success eventually became about the success. The key is to remember who you are and to be yourself.

APOLLO: Like lean into it.

BUCKINGHAM: Lean into it, or subvert people's expectations for the sake of your own growth. I did something really radical after *Rumours*, which was that I made the *Tusk* album. It was just a whole other palette. It wasn't *Rumours 2*, but it set me on the right path for always valuing art over commerce.

APOLLO: And it aged really well. When I made my first projects before *Ivory*, I was broke. I wasn't really thinking about it. It was just pure.

BUCKINGHAM: After *Tusk*, there was a backlash, and Mick [Fleetwood] says to me, "Well, we're not going to do that anymore." I had to try to get back to the spontaneous mindset we had that led to *Rumours*. If I was going to keep following my heart, I had to start making solo albums. The people that were fans of mine, in the context of Fleetwood Mac, you lose nine-tenths of that. [With solo music], you can bring a whole other approach, on a production level, in the studio, and onstage. You've got some Spanish on the album, right?

APOLLO: Yeah, a little bit. My mom and dad, they're from Mexico. They knew Michael Jackson. And my dad knew the Beatles, so that was it. He showed me 'Yesterday', and that was one of the first songs I learned on guitar.

BUCKINGHAM: Not a bad place to start. Those guys could write. See, I think of myself as a stylist.

APOLLO: As a stylist. Why?

BUCKINGHAM: If you think of a real writer, there are people who come from the Tin Pan Alley tradition, or Lennon and McCartney, people who just have a certain level of skill that takes them to that place. And then you've got something that is equally valid, which is more based on style.

APOLLO: Even with 'Never Going Back Again', the lyrics, your cadence. You said so much by saying so little. And I think that's really what I want to do. I wanted to ask you about how you wrote it.

BUCKINGHAM: Well, it helped that I was in a band with someone who had broken up with me.

APOLLO: You guys were broken up for a while?

BUCKINGHAM: In Stevie's [Nicks] case, I think she was drawn to a new version of herself she couldn't see before she joined Fleetwood Mac. She saw an opportunity to step out into the light a little more. I think that played into our breaking up. What I'm saying is that to have someone that you never had the luxury of having closure with made it hard to be emotionally healthy. But it might have also made it that much easier to write a song like 'Never Going Back Again', because it was the farthest thing from being academic. It was completely visceral.

APOLLO: It gave me chills hearing you talk about it. There are these harmonies that happen in the middle of the song that don't happen again. I started doing that with my songs. But that song, it woke me up.

BUCKINGHAM: That's what it's for, man. To pass it along for someone else to pick up on the meaning and make their own meaning.

APOLLO: I love making music. I've realised that I just have this creativity, I feel like I have to honour it right now in this time of my life. I'm like, 'In 20, 30 years, am I going to have this same drive?' It's so hard to make albums.

BUCKINGHAM: It's OK if you don't – that's a long way away. You're right at the beginning. It's very exciting.

APOLLO: I'm about to put out this four-song EP, and it's literally the best music I've ever written. It's like I can't stop listening to it.

BUCKINGHAM: It should go like this, you know?

APOLLO: It's interesting because only one song is about love and the rest is just about family. You just change as a writer. It's interesting when you get out of survival mode. It's like the switch is on and now it just can't stop.

BUCKINGHAM: It's funny, isn't it? Because it seems like there's always stuff passing over your head in the ether somewhere. Snatch it, and take it to the next step. Because you can have an idea and 10 minutes later, it's like, 'What was that? I don't know. It doesn't matter.' Do a voice memo at least!

APOLLO: How did you guys do voice memos back in the day?

BUCKINGHAM: Cassette players a lot of times.

APOLLO: Just in your pocket?

BUCKINGHAM: Yeah, or you just didn't. The way I work, writing and recording can become one thing.

APOLLO: I had a song and it went platinum, called 'Evergreen'. It's about watching another relationship form in front of me. I was like, 'Oh, people are reacting to this song emotionally.' So

"I'm like, 'In 20, 30 years, am I going to have this same drive?'"

— OMAR APOLLO

GROOMING BY ANNA BERNABE FOR THE WALL GROUP; APOLLO STYLING BY BRANDON TA'AMU; SWEATER AND SHOES BY LOEWE, SHIRT BY LORO PIANA, TROUSERS BY GUCCI, WATCH BY CARTIER; BUCKINGHAM STYLING BY KATE BROADRICK; STYLING ASSISTANCE BY AIDAN PALERMO; PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY JACKSON WHITE; DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: YUBO DONG

"*Rumours* was about the music. Then the success became about the success"

— LINDSEY BUCKINGHAM

I figured I needed to make even more sad music. If I can just amplify the sadness, I feel like that is what's going to feel authentic for me: 'Oh, this is how it's being perceived. How can I keep it authentic to me but still–'

BUCKINGHAM: There's nothing wrong with taking in external input, but at the end of the day, you can't let that be a driving force. A lot of artists who do what's expected of them forget who you are and why you got into it in the first place. It sounds like you already know that intuitively, so that's a good place to be.

APOLLO: I'm trying, man. I love this shit too much. Hearing you say the name of my album and naming off songs means so much to me. I was a little scared. 'He's going to be like, "This fucking young guy."'

BUCKINGHAM: I wasn't really super aware of you before all of this, but my daughters were.

APOLLO: Oh, they were?

BUCKINGHAM: Yes. I have three [kids].

APOLLO: They got good taste, man.

BUCKINGHAM: They were psyched. One of the things that was so cool about touring with Fleetwood Mac, there was a point, probably early 2000s, when I'd see three generations of people in the audience. And you're going, 'OK, well if it's making sense to the 75-year-old, but it's also making sense to the 15-year-old, we must have done something right.'

APOLLO: That's what I want. What really sticks is authenticity.

BUCKINGHAM: I think it can be hard. It's probably hard being Taylor Swift. Although she seems like she's handling it pretty well, all things considered. Not sure about Matty Healy, that kind of came and went. He seems like a loose cannon, that guy.

APOLLO: You're funny.

BUCKINGHAM: I mean, I like that band, but ...

APOLLO: You're tapped in, man.

BUCKINGHAM: I try to keep up as much as I can because there's good stuff out there.

APOLLO: When people say, like, "Oh, no, music isn't good," it's like you're just not looking for it.

BUCKINGHAM: Sometimes it's better than other times. But if you want a great pop song, listen to 'As It Was', by Harry Styles. I mean, come on.

Lindsey, I wanted to ask about this space we're in and how you used it for Tusk.

BUCKINGHAM: I used to try to leave here at a reasonable hour, midnight or so. I didn't want to stay here all night. Mick wouldn't let me leave. If I wanted to leave, I'd have to say, "Hey, I'm going to the bathroom," and I'd just walk out to my car. A bunch of times Mick would come out and grab me.

APOLLO: That's how it is in the studio. You look up and it's, like, six o'clock in the morning.

BUCKINGHAM: Crazy. And in those days, with all the substances–

Lindsey, is it weird coming back into the space that they made for Tusk*?*

BUCKINGHAM: Christine [McVie] and I were here more recently. We were trying to make a Fleetwood Mac album, but Stevie refused to participate. But we had John and Mick in here, and Christine and me, four out of five, and we did what ended up being a duet album back in 2017, I guess. It was great.

APOLLO: There was this one song on it that I really loved, 'In My World'. That song is fire.

What's it like listening to that album with Christine now, a few months after she passed?

BUCKINGHAM: I did listen to it once after she passed, and it held up very well for me. It was sad losing her. No one really saw that coming. She'd been ill for a little while, but no one really expected her to die... I got to take Christine out on the road. She'd never seen what it was like touring outside of Fleetwood Mac and all the politics. I think it was really an eye-opener for her about what the whole thing should be more of. Fleetwood Mac was always a family, but was always a dysfunctional family.

Lindsey, last time we spoke, you told me that you would come back to Fleetwood Mac "like a shot".

BUCKINGHAM: And I would... I always have been ready to come back if the opportunity presented itself. We could still do it now, even without Christine. But the only way that would happen is if Stevie said she wanted to do it. She'd have to have some kind of an epiphany, and I don't necessarily see that happening. I think that ending on the proper note would be a better way to do it than the way it has been left.

APOLLO: I had this thing that whenever there's someone in my life I write a song about, that I'm intimately involved with, I send it to them to see if they catch on if it's about them or not. Or they ask, "Is this about me?" And I'm like, "Yeah, that one's about you."

BUCKINGHAM: I was still writing songs occasionally about Stevie, not that long ago, but most of the songs in the last 20 years have been about my wife.

APOLLO: Recently, I was writing from a perspective from when I was a child, because those are moments that happened and it doesn't mean that you feel it right now. But you remember. ®

THE STUDIO

THE VILLAGE, LOS ANGELES
HIT LIST: Fleetwood Mac, *Tusk*; Dr. Dre, *The Chronic*; Whitney Houston, *The Bodyguard Original Soundtrack*; Janet Jackson, *Damita Jo*

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UNIVERSAL AUDIO

VICTORIA MONÉT AND KELLY ROWLAND

They knew they were fans of each other's music — but the two R&B singers find out that they have much more than that in common in a conversation full of laughter, tears, and so much love

BY MANKAPRR CONTEH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
KANYA IWANA

A SMALL ROOM at the top of Hollywood's historic Paramount Recording Studios is serving as a salon for Victoria Monét as she and a stylist put the finishing touches on her hair. She's preparing to sit down with Kelly Rowland, and she's pretty nervous. Meeting a role model can do that to a person.

When Destiny's Child released *The Writing's on the Wall* in 1997, Monét was about 10 years old, and Rowland about 18. Like many Black girls at the turn of the century (and today), Victoria loved Destiny's Child. She says when she saw Rowland on that album cover – brown-skinned like her, in a gleaming halter top, standing proudly with her bandmates Beyoncé, LeToya Luckett, and LaTavia Roberson – she saw someone she could look up to.

Back then, Destiny's Child often worked out of this very studio. Rowland, 42, makes herself at home when she arrives, and Monét, 34, goes over to deliver some roses that she brought. Rowland receives her with a warm embrace and offers Monét a chance to get in on the salad order she's placing, in the love language of food.

Monét's butterflies seem to float away as the two take photos together. They listen to each other keenly as they talk about their kids. Rowland has two sons, Titan, nine, and Noah, two; Monét's daughter, Hazel, is a month younger than Noah. At one point, Rowland reveals that she and Noah shared a special moment to 'We Might Even Be Falling in Love', a soulful interlude from Monét's 2020 EP, *Jaguar,* that became part of a popular social media challenge.

The two artists find other points of connection in their conversation, some unexpected and emotional. Soon, both of them are dabbing away tears as they reflect on music and family.

MONÉT: I think the first time we connected was in 2021. You had just had Noah, and I was pregnant and trekking along to have Hazel. And you were just so sweet. Having a baby in a pandemic can be isolating.

ROWLAND: Yes.

MONÉT: So to have you there telling me advice was just lovely. I have to give you your flowers just for being a great human being in addition to being a great musician.

ROWLAND: Thank you so much. It's dope to me that you're like, "I grew up with your music," and now I'm listening to yours. And my children are listening to your music. Your music really transcends through generations.

MONÉT: That means so much.

ROWLAND: Oh, no, absolutely. It has so much soul, has so much fun. It's just a class all by itself. And I genuinely love it. I love what you bring to this generation. You force everybody to step the fuck up.

MONÉT: Thank you! It all feels really full circle, because I moved to LA in 2009 to audition to be in a girl group. It ended up being me and two other girls, one from New York and one from Cincinnati. And when I tell you we ran down 'Say My Name' and 'Cater 2 U', like, there's a bunch of YouTube videos–

ROWLAND: I'm gonna find them!

MONÉT: Oh, no, I shouldn't have said that! But no, they're all over the internet.

ROWLAND: To be in a girl group and then to be off on your own... I'm intrigued to know how you handled that transition.

MONÉT: It was kind of like triumph, then heartbreak, then triumph, then heartbreak. We had sang for a bunch of executives covering Destiny's Child, and we got signed to Motown. And then there was a point where, I guess, staff switched, so they dropped the group. I kind of had to pause. And I think that's where my pursuit of songwriting came in heavily, just trying to find a way to still express myself. Writing became how I got into more rooms.

ROWLAND: I applaud you, because I remember that transition was crazy for me. And when you said the high-low, I completely understood that. I remember being like, 'What is about to happen?' It can be quite jolting. But you handled it with ease.

MONÉT: You as well... Everyone across the board is like, "Kelly is such a sweetheart. She makes you feel like you belong in that room. She makes you feel so loved and warm." It just feels like a hug, hanging out, talking to you.

ROWLAND: I don't mind being a hug!

MONÉT: It's a nice firm hug. It's not like the church hug. It's a real hug.

ROWLAND: I think people know that you're a songwriter, you're an artist. But look, when you made us [as fans] write a second verse [to 'We Might Even Be Falling in Love']? Which I literally still listen to over and over again! Like, 'Why didn't she do a second verse?' "Well, write it, shit." It's so brilliant!

MONÉT: You know what? To be honest, contractually, I cannot make the record longer. So I had to find a way around, you know, and also just try to be creative. That was a fun way to hear people's different take on it.

ROWLAND: That's me and Noah's song.

MONÉT: I love that so much! I think I saw a video of you guys in the closet dancing?

ROWLAND: Yes. I was dancing with my baby in my bra in the closet. [*Sings*] "*Might even be falling in love*..." The way he looked at me and the way we locked eyes is literally burned in my brain. That's what I mean. He'll never forget that.

MONÉT: So I wanted to share something with you that I recently found out.

ROWLAND: What? We family?

MONÉT: We could be. I found out that your dad's last name is Lovett, and my family's last name is Lovett. Lovett Funeral Home in Mobile, Alabama.

ROWLAND: L-O-V-E-T-T?

MONÉT: Yes. So I'm like, we might need to do a little 23 [a.k.a. 23andMe] real quick, because your family's from the South.

ROWLAND: Yes! My heart is racing right now. Victoria, that is wild. Are you serious?

MONÉT: All my music is under Lovett Music Incorporated.

ROWLAND: This is really blowing my mind. So it's your dad's side?

MONÉT: It's actually my mom's side. I met my dad for the first time in my twenties. We met at an Atlanta hotel... We went a lot of our years without our fathers present. And I just wanted to know, like, how was that for you? For me, it was a lot of questioning, like, 'Why don't I have what other kids have?' That question about if I'm wanted, and then later learning the full story.

ROWLAND: Wow. That just hit me like a ton of bricks. Mine was always, 'Am I good enough?' I don't know if this happened for you – when I first met him, and we were talking on the phone, girl, it was like, I felt like a little kid, like dating all over again. I'm married, by the way. Like, 'Oh, my God, I can't wait till he calls.' You know what I mean? It was the strangest feeling. And I called my friend who's a therapist. He's like, "This was what you were supposed to feel when you were two, and three, and four, and five, and six, and seven. Every little girl is supposed to feel like this." For a long time, I was like, 'I'm fine without a dad.' But I kept searching for it so deep.

"For a long time, I was like, 'I'm fine without a dad.' But I kept searching for it"

— KELLY ROWLAND

MONÉT: HAIR BY DAVONTAE WASHINGTON FOR OPUS BEAUTY; MAKEUP BY ALEXANDER ECHEVERRI; STYLING BY TIMOTHY LUKE FOR THE ONLY AGENCY; OUTFIT BY DEFAÏENCE. ROWLAND: HAIR BY JARED HENDERSON FOR CHRIS AARON MGMT; MAKEUP BY SHEIKA DALEY FOR DAY ONE STUDIOS; STYLING BY WILFORD LENOV; OUTFIT BY MICHAEL KORS COLLECTION, SHOES BY KURT GEIGER; PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY MARLON SAVINELLI AND JEREMY ERIC SINCLAIR; DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: ARON NORMAN; MONÉT STYLING ASSISTANCE BY ALEC MALIN

"I was trying to find a way to express myself. Writing became that"

— VICTORIA MONÉT

MONÉT: I completely relate. Just growing up without him – one of the reasons why I wanted to be as successful as I could be was because I had this weird feeling or dream that I would be so famous that I would be on TV, and he would recognise my face and be like, 'Oh, my God, that's my girl.' Because I couldn't find him. He had such a common name that I would go through every name – and I'm ageing myself – in the phone book. I would call different people with this same name and ask if they knew such and such…

ROWLAND: Wow.

MONÉT: I ended up finding him eventually on Facebook. At first he was just so surprised to hear from me, and he rejected it for a while. So my first experience wasn't what I ideally thought it was going to be, like open arms, but we got there. And the first time I met my dad, I was having a drink with him, which is crazy. But that same giddy feeling, like, 'I hope he likes me.' Trying to gather all of these facts that maybe would make him proud. Like "I had good grades," you know?… For me, I felt like having Hazel was kind of like his second chance to be there.

ROWLAND: I'm happy you got to meet him.

MONÉT: I feel the same. I'm happy you guys got to have that full-circle moment. To see him as a granddad, kind of imagining what it would have been like for you… that's really beautiful. Do you feel like you like being in the room better or being in the booth [to record music]?

ROWLAND: I love the booth. I'm a booth bitch.

MONÉT: Yeah, I'm a booth bitch! I want that on a shirt! I like to have it dark, lights off. Don't look.

ROWLAND: I like it dark. The best thing to me about this particular studio was coming in and seeing the plaques on the wall.

MONÉT: [A] hit factory!

ROWLAND: It was! It still is. There's so much talent that comes out of this particular studio. Everybody worked in here. You could go out and talk to different artists: "What you working on?" "Well, what *you* working on?"

MONÉT: "Can I hear it?"

ROWLAND: On the very last record, *Destiny Fulfilled*, we rented out [a] whole studio. So you had [Bryan-Michael] Cox on one side, Rodney [Jerkins] in another, 9th Wonder in another room; Sean Garrett is writing a verse–

MONÉT: Were they competitive?

ROWLAND: A little bit competitive, but it was healthy. It was like, "Dang, y'all just did that downstairs?" It was such a good feeling. I mean, it was expensive. But it was so worth it.

MONÉT: I can only imagine.

ROWLAND: I need some advice from you. Because I hear melodies. And I'm always nervous, to this day – 25 years and I'm still nervous to sing a melody out loud. The last time I remember doing it, and it was so free, was the *Destiny Fulfilled* album, and the *Miss Kelly* album. But I haven't exercised that muscle. Do you feel like it's a muscle? Like you have to write every day to be great at songwriting?

MONÉT: To be honest, I think your best songwriting comes when you have something you've experienced. I used to think like that in a machine type of way: 'Just write every day, no matter if you have anything to write about, just do it.' And I found that my better songs came when I had a little bit of time away from it and came back because I was excited all over again… I think maybe that's one reason why we like the lights off. Because we want a judgement-free space.

ROWLAND: Yes.

MONÉT: We want to do whatever comes freely to us, without the rejection. Do you feel like you'd have an easy time if you recorded yourself, like, at your house studio, just trying stuff?

ROWLAND: Yes. I think I would also need a big sign in there that says, "Now keep in mind that I'm an artist and I'm sensitive about my shit –*E. Badu*." What is your favourite track off *Jaguar II*?

MONÉT: It changes all the time. This project is not, like, a playlist for a certain mood. It jumps from me talking about shaking ass and being outside to being completely in love. It's a new version of Victoria. And my voice has changed since having Hazel.

ROWLAND: Did it drop an octave?

MONÉT: It dropped! How can we get it back up?

ROWLAND: Girl. I wish 'When Love Takes Over' was as high live as it is on that record. It was like, "Drop that down." Everything changes. But do you feel like your voice became richer?

MONÉT: The tone is more round and thicker. But I'm like, 'I want both!'

ROWLAND: Well, I adore you. I am here for you. Behind the camera, in front of the camera, next to the camera.

MONÉT: Same! Whatever you need.

ROWLAND: I'll call you when I get over my little [hesitance]… 'I did it out loud!'

MONÉT: I can't wait to hear the new music. I know it's going to be brilliant. I think you're going to be happily surprised.

ROWLAND: I look forward to the surprise.

THE STUDIO

PARAMOUNT RECORDING STUDIOS, LOS ANGELES

HIT LIST: **Ice Cube, *Death Certificate*; Macy Gray, *On How Life Is*; Earl Sweatshirt, *Doris***

REMA & SWIZZ BEATZ

They come from different worlds, but the Bronx-born superproducer and the Nigerian pop star share a relentless creative drive — and they know the difference between flashy possessions and true art

BY PAUL THOMPSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUSTAVO SORIANO

SWIZZ BEATZ, the Bronx-bred superproducer turned art collector, and Rema, the upstart Nigerian artist who's become a global superstar, are sitting in one of the larger rooms at the Record Plant in Hollywood. This is the type of place where Swizz, 45, has worked since he was a teenager, and into which the 23-year-old Rema has scarcely ventured. Right now, though, the topic isn't music – it's the custom chain around Rema's neck, a piece inspired by the artwork for his 2022 debut album, *Rave & Roses*. "It's one of the best chains I've seen in a long time," Swizz says, as Rema explains that it took three months to design.

In 2022, the Selena Gomez-assisted version of Rema's single 'Calm Down' became the first song led by an African artist to stream more than a billion times on Spotify, but that almost seems beside the larger point of how thoroughly Rema has penetrated the culture at home and abroad. Swizz has some big numbers on his side, too; three years ago, ASCAP estimated he was responsible for more than 350 million record sales. But again, that barely measures the impact he's had since he began crafting hits in 1998 as the nephew of the founders of the pioneering rap label Ruff Ryders. An expert controller of chaos, and Alicia Keys' proud husband of more

than a decade, Swizz has made his mark both in and out of hip-hop.

As the pair discuss Rema's upbringing in Benin City, the conversation drifts back to Rema's chain, and to the role that visual art, especially those pieces produced with bronze, has played in Nigeria's history. There are numerous Nigerian masterpieces in museums around the world, Rema points out – especially in Britain, pilfered and never returned.

▷▶

SWIZZ: Do you collect art?

REMA: I create art. For now, I'm not collecting. I stay hustling.

SWIZZ: Let me know when you're ready to collect art. That's something that I've been doing for 20-something years now. I just want to show the youth – to show everybody – how to start doing different things with the earnings from their talent. There's so much put in front of us: There's cars, there's watches, there's jewellery, there's a house, and then ... you kinda get stuck after that.

I remember being your age and just wanting things. But imagine if you set a goal and had a purpose for those things, so that everything throughout your career added up to a bigger story.

REMA: In Nigeria, they say when the first person to get their family a big break, to make it out of the hood ... it's different. You just kind of have [that responsibility] in your subconscious, like, 'It's not just about me now. It's for me, my family and the generations to come.' You know?

SWIZZ: How does it feel, coming from where you're coming from, to be here in LA, where we're at? You have a show in a couple of hours where people are gonna be screaming and singing for you, and you're all the way in America. Did you digest that yet?

REMA: I'm still taking it in. Like I tell my boys ... sometimes I don't feel famous at all. I just feel like I'm chosen to do this. If there was no me, there would be no one else.

SWIZZ: You know, I actually feel that sitting in front of you. I can tell that it's a gift. I can tell in your demeanour, I can tell in your spirit, your aura. Your energy shows me that you're calculated. What are your next moves?

REMA: I've been on the road for four years. Back to back. Dropping bangers. It's helped my growth, just nonstop going, going, going. And as much as a vacation is needed, I don't like to feel idle. I have so much planned for evolving the sound. I've always been that guy: I want to change the game. To be honest, I see – even though some artists would not give me that glory or whatever – I know how many people have copied my moves. [*Swizz laughs.*] And I'm flattered by it.

SWIZZ: When you're trailblazing, people wanna follow the blaze. I remember when I used to drop my sounds, and people would pay

"I know how many people have copied my moves"

—REMA

people to copy my sounds because my price was too high at the time. I was super upset in the beginning. Then I said to myself, 'Well, the blessed part is: I'm not the one copying. I'm the person leading.' One thing people are gonna always come back to is the quality.

REMA: Facts. The quality. And when the game names you something? Like when I named myself the future, that was just an unconscious responsibility. But when the game, by itself, calls you "the prince of Afrobeats", or you're this or you're that, it's like the universe has picked you, you know? The culture cannot deny that I've opened doors. Even though I'm just four years in.

SWIZZ: Now, what would you say to the little kid back at home trying to get where you're at?

REMA: Just tell yourself the truth. Do you want it the easy way, or do you want it the hard way? Because a lot of people feel like, once they bloom, it's up. But that's where the work really starts. Some people like it for the flashiness, [or] to get the girls, the jewellery, the cars.

SWIZZ: The materialistic things.

REMA: They want to take pictures every day. They want to show off and all of that. To this day, no one knows if I even have a house.

SWIZZ: You don't even know if you have a house! You haven't been home in four years!

REMA: [*Laughs.*] I never made that my priority. My name is in the news every day, but it's not because "Rema got a girlfriend", or "Rema bought this" or "Rema did that." Even the chain – nobody knows the [price] of the chain. I just talk about the value of the album.

SWIZZ: Man, you're very wise for your position and your age, and it's a breath of fresh air to hear the youth speaking. Because a lot of people? They really don't get it.

REMA: Who gave you meaningful advice that got you this far?

SWIZZ: Oh, man. I was lucky to start in the family business. My family owned Ruff Ryders. My Uncle Dee, my Uncle Waah, my Aunt Chivon – it started as a family business, and so when I was coming up, I was always around family. DMX, Drag-On, the Lox, whoever, we was all family. Still to this day. So my uncles and them, coming from the streets and seeing them change their life, and getting into music, they gave me a lot of good advice. But I also listened to a lot of older people. Like, I listened to senior citizens. Older people that have been through so much – and they have no skin in it. They don't care about your money. They're just telling you factual things, unbiased. I would listen to a homeless person and get some knowledge and some juice from that.

REMA: Observing is a skill. Sometimes I'm just quiet in a room. [People will be] like, "Yo, what's wrong?" Nothing is wrong! I'm just taking it in.

SWIZZ: So you did your album in your room?

REMA: Yeah, most of it in the room. I had

REMA: STYLING BY MUI-HAI CHU; SUIT AND SUNGLASSES BY GUCCI, SHIRT: VINTAGE JEAN PAUL GAULTIER, BELT BY LOUIS VUITTON; PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY SAÚL BARRERA; STYLING ASSISTANCE BY DAVID GOMEZ AND JUSTICE JACKSON

"I listen to a lot of older people. Like senior citizens"

—SWIZZ BEATZ

my guy London come stay with me for a while. London's my main guy – it's about synergy. That's what I really like. It's like Metro [Boomin]: Metro has synergy with a lot of artists.

SWIZZ: He's one of my favourite producers, and he's a good friend. I mentor him. It's just amazing to see how producers are able to evolve no matter the climate. When I started, I remember, I had a rock track out: 'Rollin'', by Limp Bizkit. I had DMX, Jay, and then some R&B vibes all at the same time on the radio. Metro's one of the only ones who can be versatile like that today.

I'm glad you got a person who understands your sound, and you guys have a synergy, because that's how me and DMX were. We had a synergy. Other people would do beats, but it's different when you have that formula. You can't be scared of the artists if you're producing. If I'm just saying yes to anything [I don't like], then I'm doing myself a disservice, I'm doing the fans a disservice, and I'm doing you, as the artist, a disservice.

REMA: Process-wise, I know you've been in the studio with a lot of people who write, and a lot of people who don't write. Like, me, I don't write most of the time. I make use of energy mostly. That spark. That brightness. When that idea comes, I just want to drop immediately. Sometimes everyone knows that I could do a better take, but I'll be like, "No." I don't want that perfectionism to come in, you know?

SWIZZ: What made me really popular when I first started was I would have the beat and the chorus already laid for the artist. They just had to plug and play. I would look at the energy: if they come in with their friends, it's like, 'Oh, he's in a club mode.' Or he or she might be sad with their lover, they're a little down: 'Oh, we're gonna do a good love song.' I'm always gauging the room. Because you could come in in a mood – you're thinking about your girl – and if I'm pushing a party song on you, it's just not going to work. I mean, it worked for DMX one time, with 'Party Up'. But if you listen to 'Party Up', he does everything against the track. Like, you could tell he didn't want to do the song. But I forced him, because we was on a deadline. It's the most disrespectful verse I think he ever did, and it's the biggest song we ever made.

REMA: I feel like [with production, we're] gravitating more musically into a point where collaboration is needed. You can't do everything. I've observed, especially in the new generation of producers, not everyone is good with playing actual instruments. Everyone is really good on their computers, but sometimes you need that spice of someone who's actually musical. Like, "Bro, you killed this stuff on the laptop, but I just need some little things."

SWIZZ: If you don't specialise in something, you need help. Like, I was taking piano lessons, but I stopped taking them because I didn't like that it was putting a limit on my imagination. It started boxing me into what was "right", what was "wrong". So I said, "You know what? I actually don't want to learn the piano. I want to bring somebody in that knows it." ... My wife is like you. She cannot stand fake horns, fake bass lines. "No. Put the violin on the song."

REMA: Some people don't care. But me? I'll catch a flight to listen to that mix. We do the studio test, then we check different cars.

SWIZZ: There we go. The car test is mandatory... This studio that we're in right now ... the hallways in here would be like sometimes a party, sometimes a prison. They used to put all of the artists' names on the door, right? This room, Pharrell worked in a lot. Timbaland always worked in the other room, in the back over there. My wife [would be] in the middle, through here. It became like a community hangout where you had gang members, you had record execs, you had lawyers, you had everybody in one spot. This was where a lot of hits was made.

REMA: I've seen Pharrell videos in one studio especially. I think it might be this one.

SWIZZ: Pharrell used to have live orchestras and different string sections. Same with my wife. She used this room for big string sections and things like that. But it was crazy because we had a nice conversation, and then outside, this place was like hell. Hell in a good way!

REMA: Having different creatives in one building is amazing – and still, it's competitive.

SWIZZ: It's always competitive for me. I remember when I was working on *B'Day* with Beyoncé. She's a Virgo too. She's so smart. So she comes downstairs, and she was like, "I got Rodney Jerkins upstairs, I got this guy upstairs ..." And I thought it was gonna be just me and her. I was like, 'Oh, OK. Shit, there's a bunch of us?' And it forced me to go left. I had gotten so overloaded with how, like, these guys started in church. They can play anything. Me, I'm a kid from the Bronx. I had to change my mind and say, 'You know what? I'm in here because of what I do.' And I stripped everything out the beat, and then that's how 'Get Me Bodied' happened.

REMA: When you find your purpose, I feel like the heavens rejoice: "Here we go with someone who has found a fresh frequency to bring into the world." I don't know about superhero movies or all of that, but one way to be immortal is music.

SWIZZ: One thousand per cent. ®

THE STUDIO

THE RECORD PLANT, LOS ANGELES
HIT LIST: **Stevie Wonder, *Fulfillingness' First Finale*; Eagles, *Hotel California*; Beyoncé, *Lemonade*; Kanye West, *The College Dropout***

MUSICIANS ON MUSICIANS

BIG BOI & J.I.D

Two of the sharpest lyricists in Atlanta meet up at Stankonia Studios — the birthplace of too many classic verses to count — to trade industry stories and favourite bars, and talk about how they want to see hip-hop keep evolving

BY DELISA SHANNON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DIWANG VALDEZ

ATLANTA'S storied Stankonia Studios feel like the site of a family reunion as J.I.D walks in with a grin and daps up Big Boi with Stevie Wonder's 'As' spilling from the speakers. Both are soft-spoken, and you can barely hear what they say to each other as they exchange greetings. But it's a safe guess that they're taking a moment to show respect for each other's approach to life and their shared craft.

Fifty years after hip-hop began in the Bronx, both of these Atlanta rappers have done their part to expand the definition of the genre. Start in 1994, when Big Boi and André 3000 created a bible for Southern hip-hop with Outkast's *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, written in the basement studio they called the Dungeon and recorded right here. Or flash-forward to 2022, when J.I.D recorded parts of his most recent, and most personal, offering, *The Forever Story*, in

these same studios. Big Boi helped establish that Atlanta can never be left out of the conversation, and J.I.D has helped maintain the standard he set.

With the cameras on and lights up, they settle into a languid Southern rhythm. Much like their rhymes, their conversation feels like a late-summer evening full of lightning – bright flashes that illuminate everything in sight, unpredictable yet direct. Big Boi, 48, cracks a joke that sends J.I.D, 33, into a fit of laughter. J.I.D fires something back that brings a large smile to Big Boi's face.

Big Boi reminds us that this isn't the first time Rolling Stone has asked him to take part in Musicians on Musicians – it's just the first time he had someone in mind who he wanted to sit down with. This time, when the ask came in, he knew. He snaps his fingers as he recalls how he replied: "I told them, 'Get me my dawg, man.'"

"You got to reinvent yourself every time you come out. It's hard"

— BIG BOI

J.I.D: I heard a lot of stuff was done in the Dungeon, but I want to know, since we are in Stankonia Studios, what, specifically? Give me the earliest memory of y'all working on a body of work in this space.

BIG BOI: We started out at the Dungeon, in the basement. There was no sound booth. Just a free-flowing microphone. And we wrote all of *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* in the Dungeon.

J.I.D: Well, let me stop you. What year?

BIG BOI: 1992.

J.I.D: I'm two [*laughs*].

BIG BOI: I'm 16, 17. That's when we got in there, together with Goodie Mob and everything. So when we got the deal, we got the budget to come here–

J.I.D: 1993?

BIG BOI: Yeah. The studio was called Bosstown. It was Bobby Brown's studio.

J.I.D: This spot?

BIG BOI: This spot was Bobby Brown's spot. The B room right here, we had this as the main room where we would record, and then they would mix it in the A room. All the songs – 'Git Up, Git Out', right in that room right there. And so some years passed and we had a show in North Carolina, and we saw Bobby Brown.

J.I.D: It's a good time every time you see Bobby.

BIG BOI: I know, right? [*Laughs.*] We was like, "What's up with the studio, man?" He's like, "Man, y'all can have the studio." Fast-forward, we did a deal with [Elektra's then-CEO] Sylvia Rhone to get Aquemini Records. We looked up the studio. It was in foreclosure. And Sylvia bought the studio out of foreclosure and gave it to us as part of our record deal.

J.I.D: That's crazy.

BIG BOI: Yeah. We've been here going on a good 20 now. After me and André did [Outkast's 2014 reunion tour], since he records mainly in his own private space, or his house – he's in LA – Dré was like, "Man, go ahead and buy me out." So I own it 100 per cent.

J.I.D: That's the hardest.

BIG BOI: We here, man.

J.I.D: I recorded a part of one of my songs that was on my album – it's almost gold.

BIG BOI: OK, we need that now.

J.I.D: Song is called 'Dance Now'. Part of the second verse and figuring out the last part, I did it here.

BIG BOI: You talking about something, man! That 'Dance Now', fo' sho'. Bamboo [Big Boi's son, 23] was blasting the shit out of that song, for real.

J.I.D: Today, everybody blows up viral in any second, but when was the moment you felt like, "Oh, we here. We done kicked the door down"?

BIG BOI: Before L.A. Reid gave us the album deal [at LaFace Records], he was like, "I want to see what the guys can do." We did a showcase for him. He's like, "I still don't know if they good enough."

J.I.D: A showcase is crazy. We do not do them now.

BIG BOI: Yeah, man. We got turned down twice before we actually got signed. But L.A.'s like, "OK, I'm giving y'all a shot." Rico [Wade] came to the Dungeon like, "L.A. giving us a budget – but it's gonna be on a Christmas song." We were like, "Man, they trying to fuck our career up before we get started." Rico was like, "Nah, we're gonna talk about how we do it at the Dungeon, man." We had to pick between two beats, and it was the 'Sleigh Ride' beat that TLC had, and we took 'Player's Ball'. Fast-forward, 'Player's Ball' went six weeks number one on *Billboard* [on the Hot Rap Tracks chart].

J.I.D: That's insane. That's the one. I didn't even know it was a Christmas song until I got way older.

BIG BOI: It evolved from that to us being in the Dungeon and just wanting to be respected as lyricists, you know? That's one thing about the whole squad, it's like iron sharpens iron. We were all living in one house, and it was a battle to get on certain beats. I look at it like the X-Men School for Gifted Youngsters, and everybody has specific tasks. But the main goal was to kill that microphone. And to get that respect, we were going to have to take it.

J.I.D: I'm on the same goal.

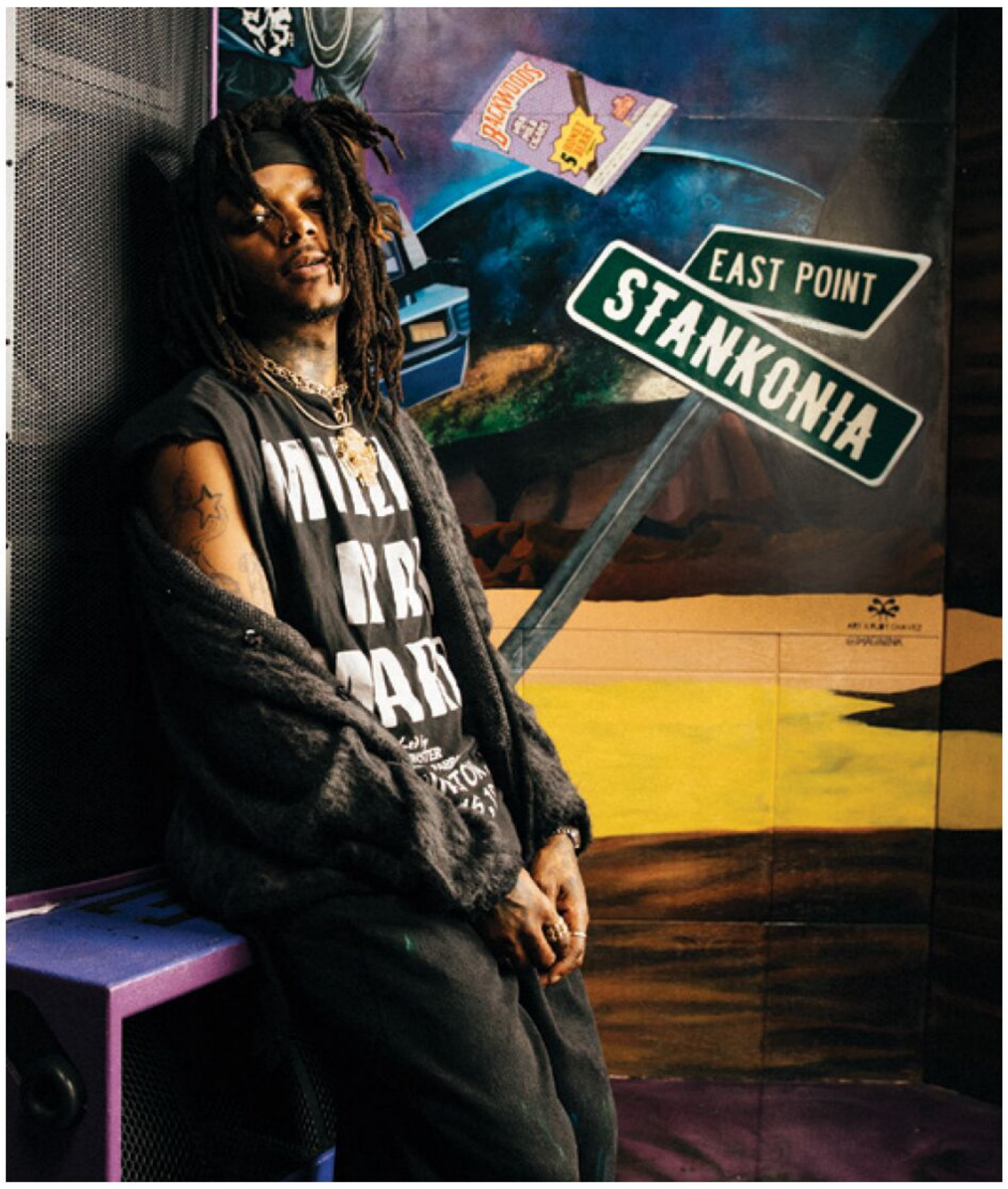
BIG BOI: I can hear it. That's why I hear somebody like you and I'm like, "Yeah, boy. He get it." I love MCs who are not just rapping, but they're saying stuff at the same time.

J.I.D: And then being from the South, they try to discredit us just because of the lingo. We're closer to slavery and all that, whatever, whatever. Like, "Oh, we a little dumber?" But y'all were like the first to be like, "No. Niggas goddamn know what's going on, and we can use this and whatever else needs to be used."

BIG BOI: We gon' give it to you.

J.I.D: The collective thing, we took a page out the playbook. My dogs like Earthgang and all the homies – 6lack, Mereba, all them people – we mirror that image and try to take it a little bit further. Because definitely, iron sharpens iron and it's just fun, doing stuff with people you love and care about. That's like the best type of music you can make, having those real conversations and then going in–

PRODUCED BY DAVID KA; J.I.D: STYLING BY ALANNA ROSE; VINTAGE T-SHIRT BY HAUS OF VAIN, TROUSERS BY MAISON MARGIELA, CARDIGAN BY NEIGHBORHOOD, JEWELLERY BY HATTON LABS AND J.I.D'S OWN; PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY DONNY TU; PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY JAE DESOUZA



"Being from the South, they try to discredit us. Y'all were the first, like, 'No'"

— J.I.D

BIG BOI: And doing something. At the same time, too, it's cool, because you don't always have to be the lead batter. You can have somebody else go bat first, and then you feed off of what they're doing. It changes the whole dynamics of a song when you got a CeeLo Green. You got an André 3000, who I had to come behind all the motherfucking time, and we just go back and forth. We push each other to be that much better.

J.I.D: And you can't even tell [who's the best], it's whoever is the best that day. There always will be another chance to say, "Khujo went crazy on that one."

BIG BOI: Khujo was most feared back then. Because his cadences and his thought process were just different. It was like you had to unlock his verse.

J.I.D: One verse that stands out: 'Y'all Scared'.

BIG BOI: Oh, yeah.

J.I.D: "*Heat'll make anything move.*"

BOTH: [*Together*] "*Even Tyson can get laid down with this tool.*"

J.I.D: [*Laughs.*] Bruh, that's the hardest line. Tyson was in his heyday.

BIG BOI: Man, let me tell you. Tyson walked up on Khujo at the BET awards, or some award show, and was like, "What you had said ..."

J.I.D: [*Laughs.*] They about the same size.

BIG BOI: [*Laughs.*] Yeah. But Tyson got a lot more fights under his belt. But Khujo ain't back down. He was like "Yeah, folk." Mike Tyson was like, [*mimics Tyson's voice*] "You had said something about me ..." For real, man.

J.I.D: That's legendary. I feel like this the first time we hearing this!

BIG BOI: J.I.D, in an Instagram caption recently, you said, "This the 50th year of hip hop we need sub genres like them rock Niggaz got." What would you call the subgenre that you exist in?

J.I.D: I don't even know.

BIG BOI: It's life music, man. I don't mean to take the question, but... it's not just one thing. You got trap and you got drill, and you got this and you got that, but certain sounds and stories transcend all of that, you know? That's what makes your [music] special. You got to have substance in it, but at the same time still gotta be jammin'. You don't wanna be too preachy, preachy.

J.I.D: Exactly, it got to be fun.

BIG BOI: Where hip-hop is now, I think more artists like J.I.D need to get that machine all the way opened up. Right now, it's a certain type of sound that's being pushed – but that's only one thing, you know what I mean? It's so many artists out there that got so many dope songs, albums, concepts, so much talent. You got J. Cole behind you, which is super dope. He knows what he's doing. When you open up the floodgates, a lot of times they don't want that realness. But you can't outwork the truth.

J.I.D: This is how we grow, to take it 50 more years. The dialogue, just learning off of the people that came before. That's how I move. Trying to push everything forward.

BIG BOI: That's the name of the game. You got to reinvent yourself every time you come out. That's why it is so hard sometimes to write, because I wrote so many songs. I don't ever want the same pattern. I don't want to use the same sentence. I don't even want to use the same slang. You know what I mean? I'm in here just like I'm digging for gold. But once I strike that motherfucker, it's over with.

J.I.D: I'm still pushing, trying to open up the sound, trying to do new patterns, make it all fresh. I've been on tour all year. So I'm seeing different types of inspiration from different walks of life, and I just try to be sensitive about my surroundings so I can take it all in.

BIG BOI: To make records, you got to live life... To me, being an MC, hearing J.I.D's music makes me want to rap. That's that shit.

J.I.D: That's the highest compliment, right there. If I make you want to rap, I can literally say you made *me* rap. These guys, they were amazingly fearless. And that was something that attracted me to it. I don't know what the next song title is gonna be, what the next artwork's gonna look like. When I was a kid – the record had to be *Aquemini*? Y'all had the lady, she was naked on there. I used to carry that around and show my friends.

BIG BOI: That's Dré's drawing. Every CD was like, "Man, what the new girl gonna look like?" The first one you can see the nipples, and *ATLiens,* you can see some nip. By the time we started getting up there, they were like, "Hold on. We got to just do a silhouette of the nip. You can't just be showing no pussy on no wax like that." Dré was like, "It's art." Which it is. The most beautiful thing God has created is a woman.

J.I.D: Everything about it was just pushing everything forward. Watching your journey and growing up being a superfan and just seeing how y'all transitioned into manhood, doing your thing still... With rock, I got a little beef just because I want our genre to be able to grow and see us do all the same things as the Rolling Stones and all them onstage. Making sure this culture is respected.

BIG BOI: You know what's really the whole key to it, man? I call that shit "out the way" records, man. Ain't even staying in your own lane because all lanes are our lanes, you know what I mean? Just dominate whatever you're gonna do. Just go super hard, man.

J.I.D: You're straight inspiration.

BIG BOI: You stepped it all the way up and all the way out, man. It's Killer Mike, you, and Janelle Monáe... even without the titties out. ®

THE STUDIO

STANKONIA STUDIOS
(FORMERLY BOSSTOWN STUDIOS), ATLANTA
HIT LIST: Outkast, *Stankonia;* Goodie Mob, *Soul Food;* Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer*

Two stars who've taught each other a lot connect for a heartfelt conversation about breaking barriers, protecting their peace, and how they both balance Mexican and American cultures

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHERIL SANCHEZ

THALÍA BECKY G

THE FIRST ORDER of business when Thalía and Becky G meet up at New York's Power Station is what music the two pop stars are going to play in the background of their photo shoot. Quickly, the room decides on Bad Bunny, and within minutes, 'Tití Me Preguntó' is pounding through the sound system, getting both artists dancing. Thalía's voice suddenly pipes in for one memorable line of the song: "*Mi primer amor se llamaba Thalía!*" ("My first love's name was Thalía!") She and Becky burst into laughter.

Ever since Thalía invited Becky to guest on one of her songs back in 2015, the two have stayed close, reaching out to compliment each other and trade advice. The contours of their careers are almost uncannily similar, despite being generations apart: Thalía, who began performing in 1981 when she was around nine years old, released her first solo album in the nineties – and became a ubiquitous figure in Latin living rooms everywhere by starring in classic telenovelas like *Marimar* and *María la del Barrio*. Becky, meanwhile, began acting around age nine before kicking off a music career with hits in English like 'Shower', from 2014. From there, she leapt into Latin markets, making pop and reggaeton hits in Spanish, and settling into a discography that's been bilingual and completely eclectic.

Both artists are good-humoured, chipper, and endlessly chatty, cracking nonstop jokes about the many twists and turns in their lives so far. Almost as soon as their conversation begins, though, it's clear their connection goes much deeper than that. The two dive headfirst into profoundly personal topics, exploring their thoughts on identity, spirituality, and therapy – and sharing how their vast pride as mexicanas led them to their most unexpected albums yet, and a wide-open future.

THE STUDIO

POWER STATION AT BERKLEENYC, NEW YORK
HIT LIST: Madonna, *Like a Virgin*; Chic, *C'est Chic*; Bruce Springsteen, *Born in the U.S.A.*; David Bowie, *Scary Monsters*

BECKY G: I am just so happy and so honoured to be here right now with you, because eight years ago, I was getting started in the industry, and you gave me one of my first opportunities as a featured artist on your song 'Como Tú No Hay Dos'. One of my favourite memories is when we were on set and I was on FaceTime with my mom. And you came walking by and you're like, "Hola, Mama! I promise you she's safe. She's OK. We're having so much fun."

THALÍA: I remember! I remember perfectly. It was so cold. Snowing. It was like a factory with no heat.

BECKY G: It was winter here in New York, y'all! But it was a video with a concept like "summer, we're sweaty, dancing in the club".

THALÍA: The first time that I met you was really at the set. The set was where we got to know each other. Immediately, we had that connection: of course, mexicanas, it was the knowledge about the little things that we love and that we are, the traditions, all those things. And it started with, "Beautiful Mama, how are you?" [*Laughs.*]

BECKY G: For me, it was such a learning opportunity to see you like the boss. "Lights here, camera here. This is the shot!" "I need this. I need that." It was like [you were] the director, the producer, the everything. I was like, "I want to do this."

THALÍA: We looked great. Sometimes you have to be picky about what you're wearing–

BECKY G: I don't even think it's picky! You know what you want.

THALÍA: You work with your team, and you tell them, "Well, the idea, the look, the inspiration is this, the concept will be that, the feel will be this." But it's working together. Teamwork is everything.

BECKY G: I was like, "This woman is a Swiss Army knife. She does it all." And that's why I pride myself in being a Swiss Army knife today, too. I think it's clear we wouldn't have come to

where we are if we didn't love what we do.

THALÍA: Now it's more space. We see all the crew here, all women. We're supporting each other. It's easier, versus decades ago.

BECKY G: What do you think has been the biggest change? Because we both got started very, very young, but I wanted to know from you, because you have one of the most iconic blueprints as a businesswoman, as an artist, as an amazing mother, an amazing wifey. You do it all.

THALÍA: Ay, my Becky, so many things, they've been changing. First of all, I want to step back a second and also tell you that I love being with you. I appreciate having your beautiful persona in front of me again. I really appreciate everything that you do also, from safeguarding and protecting Latin music and music in Spanish, that you push yourself always to do something creative.

BECKY G: Oh, I'm blushing!

THALÍA: I can tell you that when I started, it was terrible. It was just against the ocean of sharks. And luckily, I had my mother, and I have to say, my mother was the first momager. I totally understand the Kardashians [*laughs*]. It was a blessing to have Yolanda Miranda, my mother, next to me in that world. We were five sisters, and my father passed away when I was six years old, so it was a matriarchy. They were always very strong, very opinionated. And I learned that. It was moments where I had to be very structured and follow instructions. I became famous being part of a soap opera, then a group, then another group, and then …

BECKY G: I mean, can we just acknowledge how humble you are for even saying that, because we all know this! [*Laughs.*] But, yes, continue.

THALÍA: You had to follow the rules. My first group, I was 12 years old, the age of my son. I cannot picture my son going out, doing shows for all the kids while they're having a big party. I was that kid, doing the show while they were having cake, and I wanted to be part of the cake, but I was singing, right? Dressed as a clown [*laughs*]. I did four albums back then in that little group: "Dress like that, dance like that, sing like that." Then I went into another teen group. Then soap operas. It was all structure till I said, "Fuck everything. I don't care about what everybody has to say. I want to hear my voice, and that's it. I don't want to follow any rules. I want to follow my own heart."

BECKY G: My mom is also my best friend. She was never my manager, but she was really young when she had me. My mom was more of my big sister – we were learning together. I started out acting, dancing, and singing around nine years old, and I also did my fair share of girl groups. It's exactly what you were saying – finally there comes a moment where I was like, 'I was born with wings, and I'm ready to fly!' Every audition I would go to, I would clip my demo CD to my résumé, just in case the casting director knew a producer friend. You just never knew!

"There comes a moment where I was like, 'I was born with wings. I'm ready to fly!'"

— BECKY G

THALÍA: You were motivated. And we didn't have social media.

BECKY G: Back then, it was what I call hand-to-hand combat. I consider it a luxury that I had that opportunity to perform in front of crowds in grocery-store parking lots, in front of sometimes nobody but my family, to get those repetitions in. With all the talent shows that exist today, with all of the social media, overnight successes, the viral moments, artists get signed and then they get thrown on this massive stage. I feel like I want to take care of them. This is a lot very quickly! Are they OK? What do these contracts look like? Is their mental health all right?

THALÍA: Yeah. It's so much, so quick, versus what we just said. Mental health is a big issue right now.

BECKY G: We're going to start our own school of rock, basically. It's going to be a Becky G and Thalía crash course that you guys can come take.

THALÍA: [*Laughs.*] Yes, yes, totally.

BECKY G: I'm always thinking about that. I slide into everybody's DMs when they're having their moment, and I'm like, "Here's my number, call me." Because you did that for me and that did so much. I mean, there are personal things that happened a couple years ago, and I called you and was like, "Hey, this is going on with my health and it's very new to me, and I wanted to just talk to you about what your experience is like." I think we have to take care of each other because not a lot of people really understand.

THALÍA: The most important thing in my experiences is my faith, and how balanced is my life? God is there first, before anything. What are the other priorities? I have two families: I have my husband, my kids, but I have my fans, my Thalía family. I have to take care of them but take care of my kids. I'm making sure that my daughter is doing great, and my son is doing good.

BECKY G: And you do it so well. Especially in Latin culture, the women were raised to be so giving. Giving, giving, giving, giving, giving, giving, giving. We take care of everyone before ourselves. I want to know if you ever found yourself in a moment where you felt like you were pouring from an empty cup, and what did you figure out worked best for you to be able to give more?

THALÍA: There is always going to be a moment where you're overextending yourself. Especially being a mom and having a job, you're always going to have a challenge. There's no option: being a mom is so intense. And our career is so draining. For me, understanding that I have to feel happy first is what makes the difference. I have my routines that are untouchable. It could be the way I prepare my coffee. It could be the first thing that you think of in the morning,

BECKY G: HAIR BY DANIELLE PRIANO FOR KALPANA; MAKEUP BY KEITA MOORE FOR THE ONLY AGENCY; THALIA: HAIR BY JENNIFER MATOS; STYLING BY EMMA OLECK; BECKY G: DRESS, EARRINGS AND RING BY ALEXANDER MCQUEEN, TIGHTS BY WOLFORD, BRACELET BY ALEXIS BITTAR, SHOES BY GIUSEPPE ZANOTTI; THALIA: DRESS, SHOES AND EARRINGS: THALIA'S OWN, RINGS BY SWAROVSKI, ALEXIS BITTAR AND THALIA'S OWN; TAILORING BY ESTEVAN VARGAS; PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY CHAD HILLIARD; STYLING ASSISTANCE BY MARLI GIEDT

"It's amazing to have a legacy that's so rich. Being Latina, it's a gift"

— THALÍA

it could be a simple prayer that you do. Love yourself. Give yourself time. And it's OK to not feel good. How do you do it?

BECKY G: Yeah, it's a little bit of the same thing. My faith, when I found it myself, wasn't something that I was looking for. Growing up, sometimes it can be very forced on you, and I felt like this was a journey of my own. But I remember, I was like, "OK, I'm still feeling overwhelmed." I think having been so young, having to grow up so quickly, it was when I found myself in therapy. It is not something that's taught very commonly in our culture, to go. For us, it's like, "If you're feeling sad, drink a tea or something!" It's always something external. And I was like, "No, it's in here, and it's in here" [*points to temple and heart*].

THALÍA: It's your soul screaming for help.

BECKY G: My therapist referred to our experience as the three-legged table: the mind, the body, and the soul. And without one of those legs, the table doesn't work! I started to think about self-care as not just, like, "I did a face mask. Why am I so sad?" I was journalling, meditation, prayer, connection with friends, with family, just finding ways to connect.

THALÍA: I love what you said about therapy. But in our culture, it was a taboo. It really helps you if you get the right person. My father died, I was in shock, and I stopped talking for a whole year. My mother took me to therapy. And I was able to come back little by little from the trauma – because we are the result of traumas. It's super important to dig in and release the demons out. Just let the light come out because we are light.

BECKY G: Totally. Something you and I both have in common, which is really cool: that we're both mexicanas and proud to be. I want to say I'm Mexican, but all my cousins from Mexico tell me I'm not Mexican. And then all my friends here in America, it's like, "No, you're Mexican." And I'm like, "This identity crisis!" But this one right here [*points to Thalía*] has helped me through so much of that. And she's always embraced me as a mexicana.

THALÍA: It is tough. And I have it the other way: I'm Mexican, living in the US.

BECKY G: [*Laughs.*] I'm the reverse crossover, you're the crossover.

THALÍA: Yes. And sometimes it's tough for me. My husband, American and Italian–

BECKY G: Does he speak Spanish?

THALÍA: A little. But it's good, he doesn't understand my mysterious things [*laughs*]. The double meanings in my songs.

BECKY G: That's hilarious.

THALÍA: It's so amazing to have that legacy that is so powerful, so rich, so magical. Being Mexican, being Latina, it's a gift. I feel what is happening right now in the music industry, recognising the language: everybody is singing in Spanish now, and finally, it's the first crossover from all the Latin explosions that is in Spanish. That is incredible. Even the style, getting the Peso Pluma influence.

BECKY G: I heard that you are also working on a regional Mexican album.

THALÍA: Yes! I love it. It's something that came easy, because I have a lot of Mexican influences in my music. Some songs could be very, very Mexican in the arrangements, very bolero-style or mariachi-style. You could say one of my signatures is [album] *Amor a La Mexicana*. I dared to make a banda album, I don't know how many years ago, and it was, "Whoa! This pop girl is making a banda album?" And now it's so normal for everything to cross over, collaborating with these new writers and the fusion of the authentic corridos with what's happening. To me, it's super sexy, spectacular, powerful.

BECKY G: It's been a journey for me too. When my grandfather died, it just came to me. I would always say since I was little, "I want to do a mariachi album." I saw a video I have singing to my Papi on his 70th birthday with mariachi at a family party in Inglewood [California], in the front yard, and I was maybe 12 years old. I was just like, "Maybe it's time." What really inspired the concept of the album for me was preparing my set for Coachella because I was like, "What am I going to represent?"

THALÍA: Oh, my God, what did you feel in the minutes before?

BECKY G: You don't get to soundcheck for Coachella. I didn't get to see my set or anything before. But I like to visualise myself in those spaces, so I felt so serene and prepared. I knew what I was representing on that stage. And it was, to me, the 200 per cent. I'm 100 per cent proud to be from Inglewood, from LA, but I'm also 100 per cent proud to be Mexican.

THALÍA: How beautiful.

BECKY G: The song that I released with Peso ['Chanel'] was a vocal presentation that was different for me as an artist – so different that some people are like, "No, we prefer the reggaeton Becky, we prefer the pop Becky." But I think my proudest thing was like, "But this is the Becky that is now. This is where I want to be. This is what I want to make."

THALÍA: You're exploring a part of yourself. That is a special vocal, I have to say. Beautiful.

BECKY G: Thank you. That means a lot to me. I'm blushing again.

THALÍA: You have to recognise it. For so many years in this world, telling another woman, "Oh, you do this so well!" was the worst thing. It was like a war always, in other decades.

BECKY G: You're spilling the tea, girl.

THALÍA: And now it's just like, we are here supporting each other like how we should be. I think everybody just cut all the freaking bullshit. Everybody's like, "You know what? Let's enjoy life. Let's be ourselves. I'm going to tell you I love you." ®

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Reviews

Music

GETTING THE PARTY STARTED

Exciting and full of surprises, this debut album is likely to be one of the year's finest

The Last Dinner Party

Prelude to Ecstasy

Island Records

★★★★★

WHEN THE LAST Dinner Party emerged in April 2023 with debut single 'Nothing Matters', it elicited the kind of rapturous response that left all reasonably minded people in no doubt that they were witnessing the start of something special.

The song itself provided a powerful blast of 80s art-rock and baroque pop, while in lead singer Abigail Morris – a commanding and bewitching presence at the band's fore – it felt like a star had been born.

But one great song, of course, does not a →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Becki Gill

band make, and The Last Dinner Party's follow-ups throughout 2023 provided us with enough satisfying hints that they were on the path to delivering one of 2024's first truly great albums. There were shades of new-wave bombast on the soaring 'Sinner', while 'My Lady of Mercy' might just be the first time that a stoner rock-lite breakdown has featured in a song about Catholic guilt. On the flip side, the delicate and swarming 'On Your Side' proved that they were capable of pulling out moments of stadium-primed, hands-in-the-air balladry, too.

All of which is a long way of saying this: believe the hype, because *Prelude to Ecstasy* sees The Last Dinner Party delivering one of the greatest rock debuts in years. They may have honed their craft in intimate rooms like The Windmill in Brixton, but here's a record that will surely catapult them into arenas and, whisper it, to the very top of festival bills in years to come.

Aided by the deft hand of Arctic Monkeys producer James Ford, it's an album that proves exciting, unpredictable and gripping at every turn. An opening orchestral blast amps up the drama from the very start, before 'Burn Alive' – a frequent opener at their incredible live shows – sees the group showing they're already experts at crafting intricate guitar anthems that grab your attention from the first note and refuse to let go.

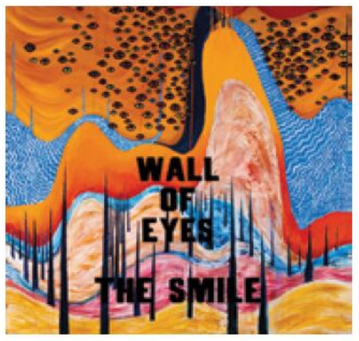
But it is a record of exceptional depth and variety too. The aforementioned early singles provide great power on the album, but Morris recently told Rolling Stone UK that the debut sees the group "in our platonic form rather than a Ziggy Stardust-type of character. It's us at our full capacity."

This sense of sonic boldness manifests itself most clearly on the swirling, Kate Bush-esque strains of 'The Feminine Urge', an intricate examination of female rage. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a curious flute-led beat is employed on 'Beautiful Boy', a slow jam about the societal privileges of being a handsome man.

It's all testament to the clarity of the bold and brave vision that The Last Dinner Party have laid out from the start of their career. A few snide detractors may have baulked at the idea that a band was able to be so seemingly fully formed at such an early juncture, but this is an album that should silence them once and for all.

These winners of Rolling Stone UK's first ever Rising Star Award have created a record that doesn't so much deliver on the hype as it smashes through the notion entirely. Come December, you'd be a fool to bet against this becoming a defining album of the year. **NICK REILLY**

THE SMILE THAT SAYS RADIOHEAD



The Smile

Wall of Eyes

XL Recordings

★★★★☆

RADIOHEAD SIDE-PROJECTS HAVE popped up throughout the latter half of the band's 30-year career. Away from the day job, Thom Yorke has made electronic forays with three solo albums as well as work with Atoms for Peace, while Jonny Greenwood has become a renowned and highly sought-after classical composer for film soundtracks. In recent years, Ed O'Brien and Philip Selway have also released solo albums, while Colin Greenwood can currently be found playing live with Nick Cave.

What marks out The Smile from these other projects is the presence of two members of Radiohead's beating heart. Both Yorke and Jonny Greenwood started this band with former Sons of Kemet drummer Tom Skinner during the pandemic, releasing debut album *A Light for Attracting Attention* in 2022. For the first time in any of the band's side-projects, it was hard to decipher the discernable differences between what The Smile made and what a new Radiohead album might sound like.

This trend continues on follow-up *Wall of Eyes*, which arrives after an extensive 2023 world tour where the band debuted new music and continued their hot streak. The group's first live shows felt freeing and largely without pressure, a sentiment that was borne out on a beautiful and untethered debut album that didn't deviate far from the Radiohead formula but produced some of the pair's best songs in a decade or more.

As with *A Light for Attracting Attention*, *Wall of Eyes* feels like Radiohead in all but name. Yorke's voice remains so strong, and his interplay with Greenwood so divine, that listening here gives the warm, comfortable feeling any fan of their 'main' band will recognise, if that categorisation of Radiohead can even exist in 2024.

'Under Our Pillows' sees Yorke slot in between Greenwood's jerky, intricate guitar lines while Skinner shows his jazz chops behind them. The singer's instantly recognisable, unchanged voice shines most on the album's best song, 'Bending Hectic'. Across the track's eight minutes, it travels from a fragmented beginning defined by Greenwood's gorgeous, fluttery guitars, before a torrent of distorted guitars clatter in with distinct shades of *The Bends*.

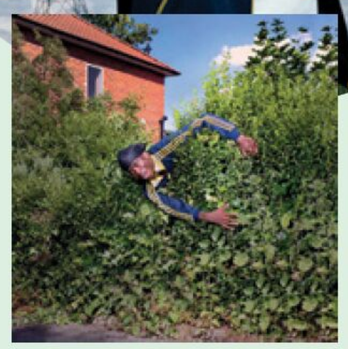
Elsewhere, the trio master gently foreboding slow jams (the album's title track), Greenwood-led epics ('Read the Room') and stark and sparse beauty (closer 'You Know Me!').

Though musically diverse, what ties the album together is its unrestricted feel. A new band name needn't mean a reinvention of the wheel, just a new medium through which to continue treading a similar path – one that remains brilliantly fruitful.

Maybe the joy of The Smile for Yorke and Greenwood is the lack of pressure relative to releasing a 10th Radiohead album. Whichever name they decide to release their newest creations under, having this duo still so eager to make music together – and their creation being this spellbinding – is reward enough for patient Radiohead fans. **WILL RICHARDS**

THE SMILE: FRANK LEBON

A VIBRANT DEBUT THAT BLURS GENRES



Master Peace

How To Make a Master Peace

PMR Records

★★★★☆

MASTER PEACE HAS always ushered audiences in with his unorthodox approach to music. On early release 'Night Time', he unequivocally preached "*you do what you want*" atop a funk-laced brand of soft rock. His canvas and ear have always been authentically eclectic – tinged with influences that range from reggae to screamo.

After an array of EPs, heartbreaks and years of acquainting himself with the dynamics of the music industry, Master Peace has packaged his thoughts in 11-track debut album *How To Make a Master Peace*. Laced with tender audacity, the record sees him lead with meticulous realism that characterises both him and his Zillennial generation. "*I wanna know what heaven feels like*," he sings to an ex-lover on 'Heaven', the album's penultimate number. A hybrid of dubstep and punk rock, the track represents Master Peace's DNA in refusing to succumb to genre-neutrality.

There's a vibrancy to Master Peace's debut album that somehow quells the pressure of such a milestone release. His thrill of being unapologetically transparent comes through on 'GET NAUGHTY!', partially aided by the punk-rock feel. It's here that Master Peace shines most, the loud runs of the electric guitar empowering his manifesto. Tracks 'Sick in the Bathroom' and 'I Might be Fake' speak to his growth while building his zest-led contribution to the sound.

Even in the project's closer, 'Happiness is Love', he bathes in his flaws, immersing himself in the euphoria of the pop-rock bassline. "*Maybe I'm a little contrived*", he notes on his inability to proclaim his love for his partner. Herein lies Master Peace's forte: he crafts intimacy that allows the world to understand the imperfection that defines him. *How To Make a Master Peace* is both a symbol of his own healing and a toolkit for wider listeners to better understand him. NICOLAS-TYRELL SCOTT

ALL IS LOVE

IDLES

TANGK

Partisan Records

★★★★☆

IN AN INTERVIEW with Rolling Stone UK (see page 62), IDLES leader Joe Talbot shares how he is "fixated on love. All the other stuff is bullshit to me right now."

On their fifth album, *TANGK*, it's clear what Talbot means. The abrasive and unapologetic spirit of IDLES burns brighter than ever, but it's tempered with a sense of emotion unlike anything that the Bristol group have ever done before. This is an album exclusively of love songs – presented in ways that see IDLES reaching some of the greatest heights of their career.

On early highlight 'Gift Horse', for instance, Talbot offers a powerful ode to his daughter over spiky guitars. "*My baby is beautiful / All is love and love is all*," he offers. But fear not, the second line shows IDLES haven't gone totally soft just yet. "*Fuck the king / He ain't the king / She's the king*," he cries.

There's doom-laden distortion on the confessional 'Roy', while 'A Gospel' might just be the closest that IDLES has ever come to recalling the piano-fuelled melancholy of Nick Cave.

This experimentation can be attributed to Radiohead producer Nigel Godrich, who was drafted in to make an album that was "advantageous and experimental". He has achieved that in spades here. The above moments point to a new, exciting future for IDLES, while also retaining enough – see the disco-primed beat of 'Dancer' – to please fans of old, too. But as a collection of love songs, it works incredibly well, allowing the group to mine their souls without losing excitement and variety in the process. Five albums into their career, IDLES remain one of Britain's most exciting and vital bands. To quote Talbot himself: all is love. NICK REILLY

MEETING OF MUSICAL MINDS

THERE ARE SHIPS in the night, and then there's Liam Gallagher and John Squire. This pair of Mancunian icons have existed in each other's musical orbits ever since Gallagher first saw The Stone Roses as a 16-year-old and credited the experience with changing his life. For his part, Squire witnessed history in the making when the Gallagher brothers recorded *Definitely Maybe* in the same studio where the Stone Roses laid down their second and final album. But apart from a team-up in 1997 for The Seahorses (Squire's post-Roses band), they've followed their own paths entirely.

Until now. The idea of Manchester music's very own *Avengers Assemble* moment is finally here, months after Liam teased that the record "pisses all over" The Beatles' *Revolver*.

While it's perhaps no surprise that the last statement is wide of the mark, this is still a musical partnership that will satisfy parka monkeys across the land. There are moments of Madchester psych, as shown on the sprawling lead single 'Just Another Rainbow', which kicks off with a guitar line reminiscent of the Roses' 'Waterfall', moments before Gallagher's vocals allow the track to sound like, dare we say it, a third coming of Squire's band.

But there is consistent variety too. The sprawling 'Love You Forever' sees Squire experimenting with a guitar lick reminiscent of Hendrix's 'Voodoo Child', while 'You're Not the One' is underpinned by a piano beat that's almost enough to convince you they've been joined by Elton John.

This, in turn, causes one of its weaknesses at times – the sheer power of their collective strength as solo performers sometimes compromises the quality of the songwriting. 'Make It Up as You Go Along', for instance, proves to be an unexpectedly on-the-nose title.

For the most part, though, you sense that their die-hard fans will have few quibbles. This is a meeting of musical minds that, largely speaking, has been well worth waiting for. NICK REILLY

Liam Gallagher and John Squire

Liam Gallagher and John Squire

Piccadilly Records

★★★☆☆

RollingStone GUIDE

Beyoncé

From humble nineties R&B beginnings to running the world, Bey's career on record is second to none

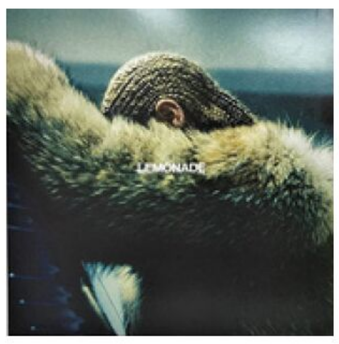
By ROB SHEFFIELD

Must-haves

Beyoncé
2013

There are albums that change the world, and then there's Beyoncé's surprise-release self-titled album. The queen dropped it out of nowhere in December 2013, with no warning, plus elaborate videos for each song — a gigantic project nobody even suspected she was planning, transforming the art of the album drop. But she did a lot more than that, because *Beyoncé* was a major artistic breakthrough as well, crushing the competition with her most complex music to date. Intimate confessions like 'Flawless' and 'Pretty Hurts' fit right in with the sexual swagger of 'Rocket', 'Blow' and 'Partition', not to mention the controversial Jay-Z duet 'Drunk in Love'. The real shock: after 15 years at the top, this woman was just hitting her prime.

Queen Bey in 2013



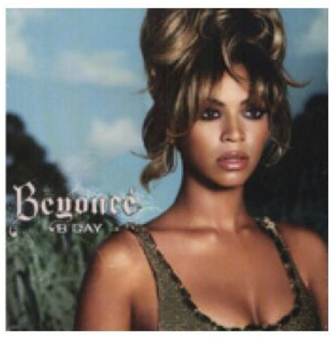
Lemonade
2016

Lemonade is this genius's boldest masterpiece, Queen Bey at her most musically and culturally ambitious. She mourns the pain of her husband's infidelity, in the aftermath of heartbreak and betrayal. But she also turns it into a portrait of an America full of conflict and turmoil. Her voice explodes into gorgeous, raging tunes like 'Sorry' and 'Love Drought'. She claims every corner of American music, from country ('Daddy Lessons') to New Orleans bounce ('Formation') to wherever Vegas meets the Lower East Side ('Hold Up'). It's the most passionate, ferocious, soul-quaking music she's ever made. So far.

Renaissance
2022

Too classic for this world. Bey hits the floor in *Renaissance*, a disco trip through decades' worth of Black queer dance culture. It's her most conceptually unified album, an hourlong mix that swerves from house to bounce to ballroom to garage. With the ear of an expert DJ, she spices it up with the right legends at the right time — 'Move' unites the New Wave cyborg Grace Jones with the Nigerian star Tems, while 'Cuff It' is a love affair with Nile Rodgers' chic guitar. Bey's goal was to make this album "a place to scream, release, feel freedom". She got there.

Further listening



B'Day
2006

She dropped *B'Day* on her 25th birthday, serving notice she was an artist with no interest in repeating her past. Everybody would have been happy with 'Crazy in Love Part 2' — but Bey had other plans and, as usual, she proved everybody wrong. The breakup taunt 'Irreplaceable', the Jigga pas de deux 'Deja Vu', the severely underrated 'Green Light' — these went way beyond audience expectations. For anyone else, 'Freakum Dress' would've been the hit of a lifetime. But on *B'Day,* it wasn't even a single — just another banger on an album full of them.

I Am ... Sasha Fierce
2008

Sasha Fierce is the alter ego Beyoncé devised for her larger-than-life onstage-diva persona — a real contrast from her soft-spoken real-world style. But both sides of her soul go full blast in her most wide-ranging album, two discs packed with hits, from the angelic ballad 'Halo' to the Destiny's Child-style clap-and-stomp 'Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)'. And sorry, but the eighties-style synth-swerve 'Radio' is absolute genius, and some of us will simply die on that hill. Don't sleep on the *I Am... World Tour* video, with her gloriously pissed-off version of Alanis Morissette's 'You Oughta Know'.

4
2011

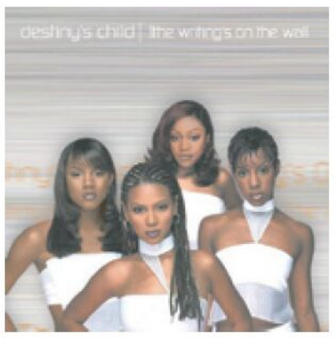
What a weird thrill it was to hear 'Countdown' for the first time — an avant-soul mind freak, with Bey boof-boofing all over the marching-band horns and synths. On *4,* she flaunts her mastery of every modern pop mode. 'Love on Top' is seventies-sweet retro-soul, piling up the key changes; 'Run the World (Girls)' is a future-shock feminist electro-stomp. 'Party' is a backyard groove with Andre 3000 of Outkast (on the album version) and J. Cole (in the remix), but it's her party all the way. After her fourth LP, everybody in the pop world was asking the same question: "How could she possibly ever top this?" Spoiler: she did.

Homecoming
2019

So much damn swag, indeed. Everybody had big hopes for Beychella — but nobody could have imagined what she had in store for her fans in the desert heat. *Homecoming* is her live LP from the 2018 Coachella Festival, accompanied by a must-see Netflix special — one of the most ambitious and intricate live albums in history. She elevates African American anthems, whether that means 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing' or the Frankie Beverly and Maze classic 'Before I Let Go'. She brings back her Destiny's Child bandmates Michelle Williams and Kelly Rowland for a reunion interlude, duets with J Balvin for the reggaeton scorcher 'Mi Gente', and mixes in snippets from Malcolm X and Nina Simone. 'I Been On' is an early draft of 'Flawless' that appears as a coda to the live album — a closing flourish to her crowning achievement as a live performer.

KEVIN MAZUR/WIREIMAGE FOR PARKWOOD ENTERTAINMENT

Going Deeper



The Writing's on the Wall

1997

Destiny's Child is a whole separate story in itself — but the Houston girl group is an indispensable part of Beyoncé's journey to stardom. Their 1997 debut hit, 'No, No, No', was the world's first taste of the Bey magic. But *The Writing's on the Wall* was the smash that put her front and centre, with staccato vocals over electro-stutter beats. 'Say My Name' became the group's definitive hit, an obsessively jealous loop of breathless chanting, while 'Jumpin' Jumpin'' urges ladies to leave their men at home and hit the club. The group went through controversial lineup changes — but there was no doubt whose voice was on top.

Dangerously in Love

2003

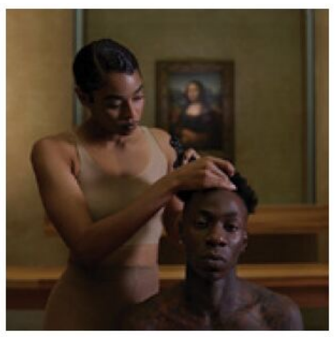
"Can Beyoncé do it on her own?" was the question that literally nobody was asking in 2003. Her 2003 solo debut made her pop's new queen, with the flash and bravado of 'Crazy in Love': those Chi-Lites horn blasts, go-go cowbells, Jay in the sidecar, and Bey behind the wheel. She proved she could hold her own with everyone from Big Boi ('Hip Hop Star') and Missy ('Signs') to Luther Vandross ('The Closer I Get to You'). 'Dangerously in Love 2' was the sequel to a deep cut from Destiny's Child, revamped into her splashy solo-ballad statement; on her new *Renaissance* tour, it's the song she still uses to raise the curtain.

ANDREW WHITE/PARKWOOD ENTERTAINMENT

FURTHER WATCHING

Black Is King

A year after the release of *The Lion King: The Gift*, Beyoncé unveiled her companion film, *Black Is King*, a complex musical-visual collage from all over the African diaspora. It's the allegory of a young prince growing up in exile, but finding his way to his throne. It includes her Black Lives Matter anthem 'Black Parade', released soon after the murder of George Floyd.



Everything Is Love

2018

Music's ultimate power couple worked through some serious drama on the Knowles-Carter marital trilogy of *Lemonade*, Jay-Z's *4:44*, and their first album together, *Everything Is Love*, released under the name the Carters. Individually, they bared their emotional issues, but on this reconciliation album, they called themselves the Carters to emphasise their family ties. It dropped as a surprise in the middle of their On the Run II Tour. In 'Apeshit', Beyoncé closes the door on the "*Becky with the good hair*" era, singing, "*Can you believe we made it?*"

The Lion King: The Gift

2019

Beyoncé stars as Nala in Disney's remake of *The Lion King*, and this is her personal soundtrack. She collaborated with African artists from Burna Boy to Wizkid to Yemi Alade, along with American rappers such as Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino, and Tierra Whack. 'Spirit' is a gospel-inspired movie theme with a choir singing in Swahili. 'Brown Skin Girl' features her daughter — making the nine-year-old Blue Ivy Carter one of the youngest Grammy Award winners of all time.

More Gems

Other highlights from her historic career

'CRAZY FEELINGS'

1999, Missy Elliott feat. Beyoncé

Beyoncé's first big showcase outside Destiny's Child. And who better to do it with than Missy Elliott? This steamy slow jam from *Da Real World* proves Miss E and Miss B are truly kindred spirits.

'03 BONNIE AND CLYDE'

2002, Jay-Z feat. Beyoncé

Her first public display of affection with Jay-Z. She sings him a Prince ballad over a Tupac sample, while he boasts they're "the new Bobby and Whitney".

'SEXY LIL THUG'

2003

When 50 Cent blew up with his debut hit, 'In Da Club', just a few weeks later, Bey was on the radio with her version, chanting, "*Go shorty, it's Beyoncé!*"

'WISHING ON A STAR'

2004

Her soulful version of the 1970s Rose Royce ballad, from her concert album *Live at Wembley* and the *Roll Bounce* soundtrack. It was released with her designer fragrance, True Star.

'CHECK ON IT'

2005, feat. Slim Thug & Bun B

One of her flirtiest, friskiest club bangers, recorded for Steve Martin's long-forgotten comedy *The Pink Panther*, co-starring Bey herself. It became a number one hit with Houston legends Slim Thug and Bun B.

'LISTEN'

2006

Her showstopper in the *Dreamgirls* film. 'Listen' wasn't in the Broadway musical — it was written for the movie so Bey could get her own big spotlight ballad.

'BELLO EMBUSTERO'

2007, Beyoncé and Shakira

The Shakira duet 'Beautiful Liar' was a hit in English, but it sounds even fiercer in this translation. There's nothing like Bey testifying in Spanish.

'I'D RATHER GO BLIND'

2008

Bey plays soul legend Etta James in *Cadillac Records*, the 2008 drama about fifties R&B. She sang several James tunes in the film, but 'I'd Rather Go Blind' is the real heartbreaker.

'TELEPHONE'

2009, Lady Gaga feat. Beyoncé

This Gaga collabo was a huge moment for both stars — especially the epic nine-minute video directed by Jonas Aukerland, where Bey and Gaga play the most murderous road-trip duo since Bonnie and Clyde.

'BACK TO BLACK'

2013, Beyoncé and Andre 3000

A controversial but excellent moment on the soundtrack of Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*, revamping the Amy Winehouse ballad into a swank duet with Andre 3000.

'FEELING MYSELF'

2015, Nicki Minaj feat. Beyoncé

A swaggering ode to sisterhood and self-love, from *The Pinkprint*, co-written by SZA. It's also one of the most relatably delightful videos either star has made.

'DADDY LESSONS (REMIX)'

2016, Beyoncé feat. the Chicks

Beyoncé stole the show at the CMA Awards, doing her *Lemonade* outlaw tale with the (then-Dixie) Chicks, repping badass Texas women.

'SAVAGE (REMIX)'

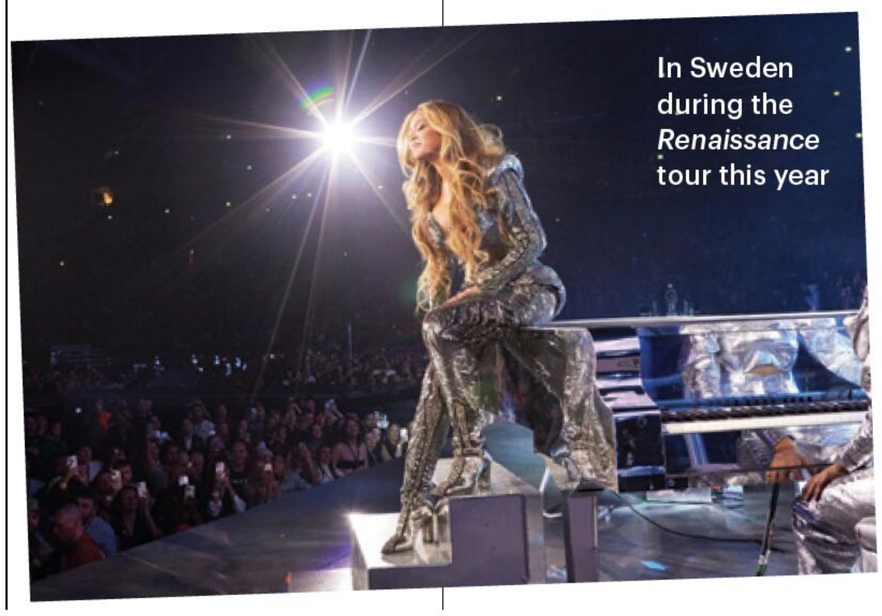
2020, Megan Thee Stallion feat. Beyoncé

Houston girls run the world. When this song won a Grammy, Megan said her motto is "What would Beyoncé do? But let me make it a little ratchet."

'BE ALIVE'

2021

Beyoncé earned her first Oscar nomination for her *King Richard* theme. The beat comes from the same Doors song Jay-Z sampled for 'Take-over' — a full-circle moment for the Carters.



In Sweden during the *Renaissance* tour this year

Lonely neighbours Harry (Mescal) and Adam (Scott) become lovers

Film

LOVE IS THE ANSWER

An unmissable romance that shines a poignant and nostalgic light on how the 80s shaped life and love for gay men growing up in that era

All of Us Strangers

STARRING Andrew Scott, Paul Mescal, Claire Foy, Jamie Bell

DIRECTED BY Andrew Haigh

★★★★★

IF there is such a thing as a 'must-see', *All of Us Strangers* is it. An exquisite drama from British writer-director Andrew Haigh (*Weekend*, *45 Years*), it stars the dynamite combo of Andrew Scott and Paul Mescal. Scott is Adam, a writer living in a sleek modern block in London. He rarely comes across any neighbours, apart from Harry (Mescal), a charismatic, unpredictable younger man who invites himself into shy Adam's life. As the pair grow closer, Adam also returns to his childhood home in Croydon, where he mysteriously encounters his dead parents (Claire Foy and Jamie Bell), living just as they were in the 1980s. While shaken, Adam is intrigued and takes the opportunity to share more details of his life – chiefly, his sexuality.

Watching Adam hesitantly come out to the parents he lost is deeply moving and involves the most tear-jerking use of The Pet Shop Boys' work ever committed to cinema. While using specific details of his own life – including filming in the very house he grew up in – Haigh taps into a universal sense of nostalgia for childhood and departed loved ones.

The film is also a perceptive exploration of changing attitudes towards homosexuality over the past few decades. Adam's parents are stuck in an era where the Aids crisis was heightening homophobia and increasing concern and confusion in the parents of those who suspected their kids were, as Bell's character puts it, "a bit tutti-frutti". Bell is tremendous as the macho, moustachioed father whose fashion style might look misleading to the modern queer eye. Meanwhile, a perm-haired Claire Foy puts in a compassionate and darkly comedic performance as the mother who asks well-meaning but ignorant questions about her son's lifestyle. And Mescal is charming, enigmatic, funny and sexy as Harry, who sparks yet more emotions in the lonely Adam.

All of Us Strangers is loosely based on the 1987 novel *Strangers* by Taichi Yamada, which was made into a Japanese film called *The Discarnates*. In both of those cases, the protagonist was straight, and Haigh's choice to switch to a gay character is a masterstroke that enables him to mine his own past and psychology with affecting results. With a quartet of accomplished stars at its centre, *All of Us Strangers* is a potent exploration of love and loss that will stay with you long after the credits roll – as will Emilie Levienaise-Farrouch's haunting score and the soundtrack, which includes Frankie Goes To Hollywood's 'The Power of Love'. See it on the big screen. *26 JANUARY* **ANNA SMITH**

ALL OF US STRANGERS: COURTESY OF SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES; *THE ZONE OF INTEREST*: COURTESY OF A24; *AMERICAN FICTION*: CLAIRE FOLGER; *JACKDAW*: COURTESY OFVERTIGO RELEASING

Hedwig (Sandra Hüller) in the fur coat

AT THE GATES OF HELL

The Zone of Interest

STARRING
Christian Friedel, Sandra Hüller

DIRECTED BY
Jonathan Glazer

★★★★★

JONATHAN GLAZER'S AWARD-WINNING drama is as visually beautiful as it is thematically heart-breaking. Inspired by Martin Amis's novel of the same name, it follows the daily life of Nazi officer Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel) and his wife Hedwig Höss (Sandra Hüller). Their sunny home is next door to Auschwitz, where atrocities are taking place every minute. The calm, apparent denial of Hedwig is truly chilling as she fusses over her home and her husband's status, while we gradually come to guess and learn more about his sinister duties. Small details become horrifying, whether Hedwig is showing off a new fur coat – taken from a murdered Jewish woman – or Rudolf is hastily pulling his children out of the river where they have been swimming and scrubbing them down. This is a true horror, all the more disturbing for the apparent ease with which this couple accept the status quo. It also feels, sadly, incredibly relevant to the modern day, subtly warning of the dangers of complacency and complicity. All of the actors do a terrific job, and the direction and sound design in particular seem likely to take gongs. But this film will last well beyond awards season – it's a classic in the making. *2 FEBRUARY* **ANNA SMITH**

MORE THAN WORDS

American Fiction

STARRING
Jeffrey Wright, Tracee Ellis Ross, John Ortiz

DIRECTED BY
Cord Jefferson

★★★★☆

THIS SHARP, WITTY WATCH stars an excellent Jeffrey Wright as Monk, a modestly successful writer who's trying to sell his next novel – without much luck. While attending a book festival, he becomes increasingly frustrated by the attention given to Black writers who pen stories that he reckons pander to ridiculous racial stereotypes. Deciding to prove his point, he knocks back some whisky and writes a novel full of swearing, street violence and broadly written characters. Guess what? It's a huge hit.

Watching middle-class Monk trying to navigate the publicity scene while pretending to be a wanted criminal is an absolute hoot, and this movie has something to say about literature, race, hypocrisy and hype. It has the ability to make audiences laugh like a drain and wriggle uncomfortably in their seats at the same time. There's also heart, as Monk loses a family member and gains new friends. *American Fiction*'s ending may not be all you hope for, but the journey is a very entertaining ride, marking writer-director Cord Jefferson as one to watch. And if you want to read the novel it's based on, look for *Erasure* by Percival Everett. *2 FEBRUARY* **ANNA SMITH**

Jeffrey Wright stars in this satire about racial stereotyping

Jack (Jackson-Cohen) with Bo (Coleman)

DESPERATE MEASURES

Jackdaw

STARRING
Oliver Jackson-Cohen, Jenna Coleman, Rory McCann, Thomas Turgoose, Vivienne Acheampong, Allan Mustafa

DIRECTED BY
Jamie Childs

★★★☆☆

A GRITTY BRITISH CRIME THRILLER set in the North East, *Jackdaw* is an uneven but enjoyable debut from writer-director Jamie Childs. Set over the course of one eventful night, it stars Oliver Jackson-Cohen as Jack, an army veteran who returns home and unwisely takes a job for a local crime lord named Silas. Not only is he double-crossed, but his younger brother is kidnapped, and Jack races around trying to find him, encountering a series of characters along the way. The most entertaining of these is played by *This is England*'s Thomas Turgoose, who brings humour, heart and a few surprises to the story. The supporting cast also includes a terrific Jenna Colman, and the settings range from boxing gyms to illegal raves. After a slow start, *Jackdaw* becomes a gripping watch that gradually reveals more about its enigmatic hero, with a fun soundtrack that includes The Prodigy, The KLF, Aphex Twin and Adam and the Ants. *26 JANUARY* **ANNA SMITH**

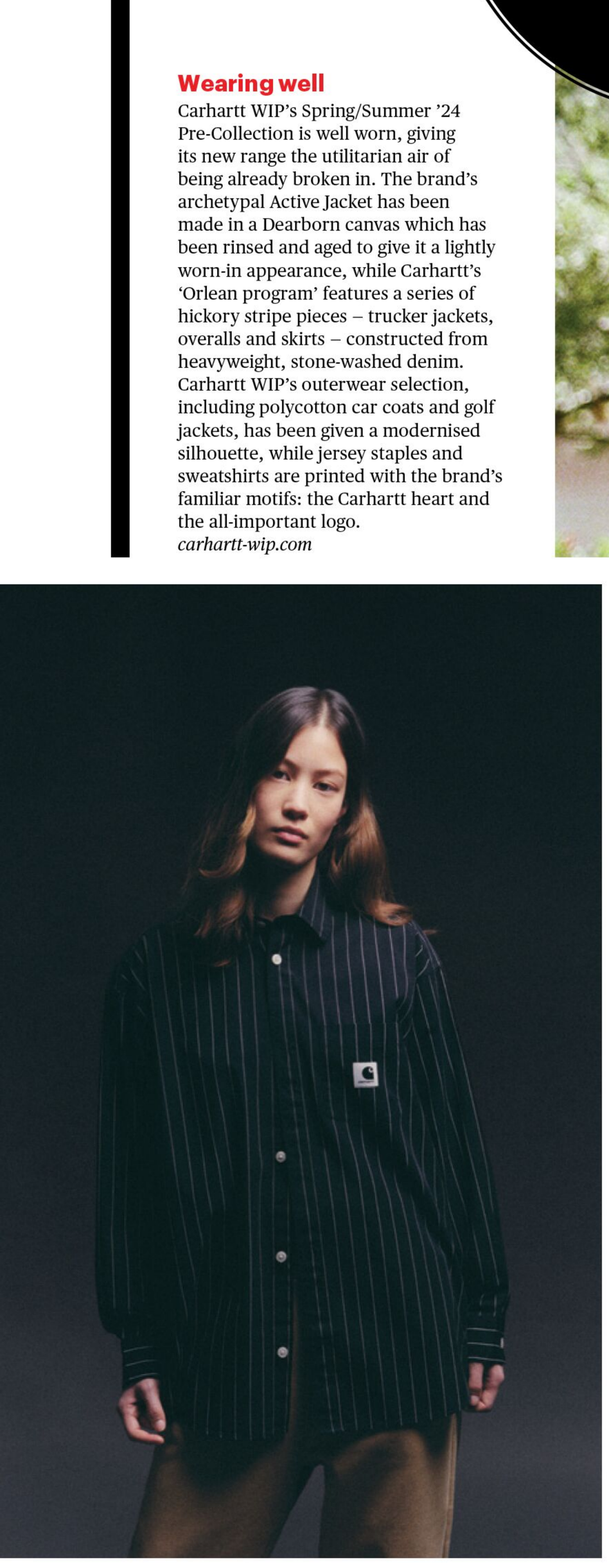
STYLE

WHAT WE WANT AND WHAT WE NEED

BY **JOSEPH KOCHARIAN**

Wearing well

Carhartt WIP's Spring/Summer '24 Pre-Collection is well worn, giving its new range the utilitarian air of being already broken in. The brand's archetypal Active Jacket has been made in a Dearborn canvas which has been rinsed and aged to give it a lightly worn-in appearance, while Carhartt's 'Orlean program' features a series of hickory stripe pieces – trucker jackets, overalls and skirts – constructed from heavyweight, stone-washed denim. Carhartt WIP's outerwear selection, including polycotton car coats and golf jackets, has been given a modernised silhouette, while jersey staples and sweatshirts are printed with the brand's familiar motifs: the Carhartt heart and the all-important logo.
carhartt-wip.com



Vacay vibes

CDLP is bridging the gap between tailoring and leisurewear with its Resort 2024 collection. It's a summery, breezy affair, with separates that come in rust-toned leopard print and colour-blocked hues of off-white, cinnamon and classic monochrome. The pieces have been crafted with TENCEL™ Lyocell and linen. Airy and softer silhouettes lend a Riviera feel to the collection, with patch-pocket jackets, and semi-tailored trousers with soft front pleats, a half-stretch waist and a belted front closure. The brand's swim offering features new fabrics and shades too, with briefs, tanga briefs and box-cut briefs that will have you yearning for lazy, salty, summery days at the beach.
cdlp.com

The art of craft

The word 'Bottega' roughly translated means 'workshop' or 'producer of small runs of handmade items'. As one of the most famous bottegas on the planet, for the third year running, fashion brand Bottega Veneta has committed to supporting smaller, artisanal workshops around the world. This time the scheme focuses on global experts and brands Liu Wenhui, Cheng Tsung Feng, Kitai Rhee and Modiano, who all use their creativity and skills to empower imagination and inspire togetherness. Liu Wenhui specialises in the research, design and development of building blocks inspired by ancient Chinese architecture. Kitai Rhee focuses on making the Korean kite bangpae yeon, while Modiano, founded in Italy in 1868, specialises in playing cards. Finally, Cheng Tsung Feng studies traditional craft culture, learning the methods behind handmade objects of the past and creating artwork inspired by these techniques. This Bottega Veneta initiative is a smart way for this big brand to shine a light on the art of craft.
bottegaveneta.com

AKILA BERJAOUI

Enter the Dragon

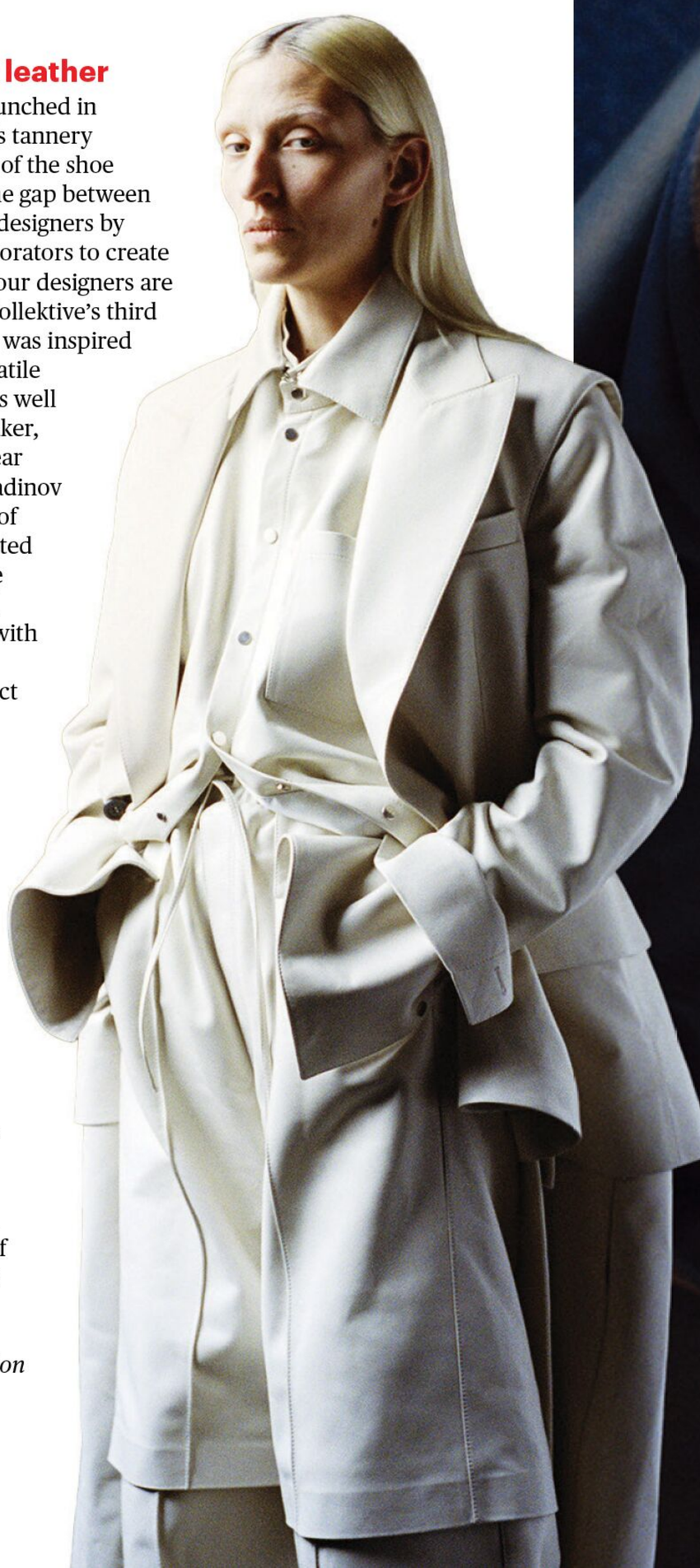
As part of its Friends of Fendi series, the Italian luxury fashion house has collaborated with Hiroshi Fujiwara's Fragment brand to create a special Pokémon collection to celebrate the Chinese year of the Dragon. The Fendi x Frgmt x Pokémon collection combines Fujiwara's creativity as 'godfather of streetwear' with Pokémon's playfulness and Fendi's luxury aesthetic. You'll find everything from 3D leather marquetry with inlays and prints on FF jacquard and canvas backings to microbead FF embroidery and fringing. Dragon-type Pokémon Dragonite and Dratini feature heavily on accessories, including a new Baguette and Mini Baguette bag (also available in nano sizes). As well as on leather goods, the FF logo and Pokémon signatures appear on key charms and jewellery – and the iconic pokeball. Also part of the capsule are relaxed clothing, including T-shirts, hoodies and silk FF pyjamas with Dragonite designs. This collection is limited edition, so like a rare Pokémon, it will be incredibly tricky to 'catch em all'.

fendi.com and pokemongolive.com

For the love of leather

At.Kollektive was launched in 2022 by Netherlands tannery ECCO – an offshoot of the shoe brand – to bridge the gap between manufacturers and designers by inviting guest collaborators to create innovative works. Four designers are contributing to At.Kollektive's third collection. Peter Do was inspired to create super-versatile genderless pieces, as well as his first ever sneaker, the Hybrid. Menswear specialist Kiko Kostadinov focused on his love of travel to make elevated essentials that range from passport-sized pieces to carry-alls with a snaps design that allows you to connect each bag together. Shoe designer Nina Christen has reworked footwear classics, creating a "ballerina pump with the attitude of a sneaker", and architect Anne Holtrop designed a leather table inspired by her visit to the tannery. The collection fuses modern design with the expertise of a heritage brand, creating a little bit of leather magic in the process.

Available in At. Kollektive shops and on atkollektive.com



Surf'n'skate

Sound innovator Beats has collaborated with streetwear brand Stüssy for its latest headphones, which draw inspiration from one of the main motifs of the '90s: the skater-surfer dude. The Beats Studio Pro design incorporates niche details from both sports, with colours reminiscent of the urethane skateboard wheels as well as materials like and fiberglass which are often used to make surfboards. When it comes to tech, all the trusty Beats magic is there: adaptive active noise cancellation, spatial audio capabilities, and an extended battery life of up to 40 hours – perfect for enjoying a bit of Nirvana, Blur, Oasis or the Spice Girls in all their glory.

Available at stussy.com and beatsbydre.com

LUXURY ACCESSORIES

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Popping off

The Selfridges Corner Shop in London is the mother of all pop-ups. The innovative and dynamic space created by the luxury department store has hosted everything from a Barbie boutique to an Elton John retrospective as well as a plethora of high-fashion designers. Now it's Louis Vuitton's turn. Recreating elements from the brand's Spring/Summer '24 show venue, the space will feature Pharrell Williams's first collection for the label which was shown in Paris last June. This is the place to shop the first drop of the range, including the iconic Pharrell LV Speedy bag, but serious demand means this cult accessory is unlikely to be around for long. Catch the Louis Vuitton pop-up in-store until mid-February.
selfridges.com

It’s Jackie!

The 90s era of Sexy Gucci is back now that Sabato De Sarno is at the helm. De Sarno debuted his first womenswear collection for the Italian brand in September 2023. There he introduced the Jackie Notte bag – his first handbag as creative director. Making a slinky addition on the runway, this slick and beautiful piece of leatherwork takes notes from the 1961 Jackie bag, while a new silhouette and subtle detail changes, including a new snap hook render, bring it right up to date. It comes in an array of different colours, but it’s the signature Gucci Rosso Ancora red hue (pictured) that we find particularly enticing.
gucci.com

FAVOURITE THINGS

Leather mini tote bag by Marc Jacobs at Selfridges

Margaux tote bag by The Row at MYTHERESA

Holdall bag by Montblanc

Bentley Bentayga EWB

RS ROAD TEST

Who doesn't love a mash-up? In which Bentley takes two of its greatest hits and, by virtue of an extended mix, creates a third. You'll be Hung Up on this one...

At the height of their pop superstardom, ABBA's Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson were asked the secret of their song-writing success. Sometimes, they revealed, they'd simply play two old songs over the top of one another to create a new one, the combination creating a previously unheard set of melodies, or a hook from which they could build.

In modern parlance this would be called a mash-up, and the resultant sampling has any number of benefits — not least of which is an easy familiarity with the blended outcome. And if you doubt that works, see what happened when Madonna extracted 30 seconds of intro from ABBA's own 'Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)' to kick-start 'Hung Up', which went to number one in a record 41 countries and sold more than 5 million copies worldwide.

Witness, then, the Bentley Bentayga Extended Wheelbase (or EWB) pictured here. Less an all-new

track, and more a rework of two of the Crewe-based carmaker's greatest hits: the best-selling, go-anywhere Bentayga SUV and the voluminous luxury of super-sized saloons for which the marque is historically lauded. It's the same, only different.

It's the same in that the base architecture of the upscale 4x4 is as you were — super-smooth V8 and V6 hybrid powertrains, a bluff, imposing façade, wheels the size of the moon and a beautifully appointed cabin awash with Bentley hallmarks that include quilted stitching upon finest leathers, open-pore veneers and hewn-from-solid switchgear. But it's different in that aft of the front passengers is an additional 180mm (around seven inches) of extra legroom which — perhaps surprisingly given that doesn't sound so much — lifts the already ample business-level accommodation to the giddying heights of first class.

And lest you should doubt the analogy, know that as an option in place of the regular, three-seat rear bench you can specify two spectacular airline-style seats that adjust in all directions and can lie almost flat, should the travails of the outside world prove too much.

So, a mash-up it is — a luxury limo with all-weather capability and a vantage point from which to look down on the world. Best, undoubtedly, experienced from a passenger perspective than that of a driver.

I mooted this much on a flying trip to France's Burgundy region for a pre-Christmas wine stock-up, watching the expansive French countryside flash by through an elongated rear window while in a semi-reclined position with a glass of something nice already in my hand. Well, the rear armrest contained a wine cooler with crystal glasses, it would have been rude not to.

And yet... this is a Bentley, also replete with driver credentials. So, for all the super-luxe accoutrements, assembled by craftsmen dealing in ultimates, I was troubled by the notion that the man up front might be having more fun than I was. So, I made sure to helm the return trip to offset my FOMO, and there, on point, were all of the virtues you might expect to find in what a grumbling, Le Mans-defeated Ettore Bugatti once described as "the fastest trucks in the world".

There's masses of underbonnet heft — our car's four-litre, twin-turbocharged V8 engine with 542 horses will do that — and it pours on cross-continent velocity like cream from a jug. Brakes the size of dustbin lids melt away speed as progressively and as easily, leaving recumbent passengers to snooze for miles on end in a cabin filled with little more than a distant hum. First class indeed.

Better still, from a pilot's perspective, this bulk shrinks around you, so this can be a driver's car, too. Four-wheel steering means response to directional change is pin-sharp, deliciously direct and instant, even on the twisties when redirecting a car of this bulk. It's a Bentley, after all. But the duality that created this car is never far away — it's big and super-luxe, yet quick and agile, can go most places but is a delight to sit in among traffic. When two become one, as it were. Though I think that was a different tune altogether.

Hung up? I'd say so. This is probably the ultimate mash-up, and an extended mix at that. **DARREN STYLES**

QUICK STATS

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542BHP
TORQUE
568LB/FT
0-60MPH
4.5 SECS
TOP SPEED
180MPH
RANGE
406 MILES
PRICE
£211,300
BENTLEYMOTORS.COM

Rod Stewart and Jools Holland

The legendary singer and epic big-band pianist on coming together for new album, Swing Fever

Congratulations on the album, guys. Rod Stewart and Jools Holland. On paper it's something of an odd couple...

ROD: Yeah, it looks like an odd marriage. But the first thing that brought us together was our love of model railroads because we're both fanatics!

JOOLS: I suppose the background is that I'm known for my big band, and we're always doing live shows. And Rod, well, he's just an incredible singer who does these amazing records, and he's an icon of rock'n'roll music – but he has a great affinity with swing music too! It was just before Christmas three years ago, and the phone rings at my home. I didn't know Rod so well, but he just said, "I'd quite like to do a record with your band." I said, "Well, I'm gonna have to think about that." And then one second later, I said, "Yeah, that'd be really great!"

One of the greatest singers in the world. That's quite the compliment, Rod.

ROD: It totally is, mate! He's no mug, that Jools Holland, I'll tell ya.

JOOLS: It's true. It's true!

There are some real swing classics you've tackled on there, 'Pennies from Heaven' and 'Almost Like Being In Love', to name but two of them...

ROD: I don't think we had one single debate about the songs we wanted to do, and we could've kept recording for another year. We agreed on absolutely everything.

JOOLS: I didn't know all of the songs either, which was really great. 'Love Is the Sweetest Thing' ended up being one of our favourites because it's one that Rod and the [backing] girls sang so beautifully, but it was also written by Ray Noble, who was an English writer. Al Bowlly had a hit with it too. It meant that there's a very English sound, you know what I mean? Adding to that, we did it in a ska style, and there's a lovely solo from Michael Bami Rose, who we did a film about on *Later...* the other week. He was one of the originators of bringing ska to England in the 1960s, so you've got all these things mashed up together to make something which just charmed me to bits.

Rod, did you feel like you were stepping out of your comfort zone?

ROD: No, I stepped right into it! You know, I did *The Great American Songbook*, which sold extraordinarily well, so this was just the next step. There were no slow songs on this album, and it's unlike *The Great American Songbook* for that. But no, I was stepping into my comfort zone. I was first introduced to this music by Long John Baldry, and he was a big fan of swing music.

Rod, you discussed this album with the BBC earlier this year and said you wanted to leave rock'n'roll behind to focus on this music. Is this really the end of Rod the rock star?

ROD: Well, you know, for as long as I live, I'm always gonna be a rock star, which I'm proud of, you know, and I've enjoyed every minute of it. But I just love singing these songs; it's like heaven for me to sing these songs. It really is heaven. I think that the truth of it is, you know, I came out of rock and pop groups, and that's why the swing part of me has only come out now. We've done 'Good Rocking Tonight' as well, which Elvis did before.

And finally, any chance of you pair taking this record on the road?

ROD: I'd love to tour with Jools, and I do hope he feels the same way!

JOOLS: Yes! I can't think of anything better than that, you know. This music sits very comfortably for us, and that's the thing. We've had a lifetime of playing live and communicating with people, and it's the best way to get five minutes of peace and quiet, going on tour! NICK REILLY

Great Love

tells many stories

The Great Love campaign is a celebration of the UK's diverse LGBTQIA+ community and their stories. Find out more at greatcampaign.com

Rico Jacob Chase, Entrepreneur & Activist/Director of TransActual UK

I felt Trans at an early age, but it took me a long time to appreciate my identity. I received a necklace from a romantic partner who loved me unconditionally - I wear it to remind me I'm worthy of love. We worked together backstage at UK Black Pride in 2019 - looking out at the sea of POC and queer people 10 thousand strong, the healing power of community and belonging was overwhelming.

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